

# **The True Mystery of The Mystical Presence**

A Vindication of the Reformed or  
Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist

original by

John Williamson Nevin

Edited & expanded by

Phillip A. Ross



Pilgrim Platform  
Marietta, Ohio

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*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.*

*—Romans 15:13*

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## INTRODUCTION

**Y**ou have in your hands an unusual book—well worth your time and effort. I say this, not because it is my book, but because it isn't. It is a work of plagiarism of sorts, but don't be dismayed. This issue is not copyright infringement of the original 1846 book now in public domain. Rather, I have built upon this old foundation by blending voices. According to Augustine, Christians are supposed to copy the Word of God, to think God's thoughts after Him. Paul insists that Christians imitate him (Paul). We are to take God's Word, and the work of the great biblical writers and theologians, and make them our own. God is not after originality or novelty, but the faithful reproduction of His thoughts and ideas. This is what I have tried to do. Of course, Nevin was not God, nor am I denying that the bulk of the work belongs to him. Indeed, I stand in awe and have profound respect for his work.

So, it might be helpful to think of this as a contemporary edition of Nevin's book, *The Mystical Presence—A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (J.B. Lippencort & Co., 1846), wherein I serve as coauthor. This is not simply a reissue of an old book. Rather, it's a sort of dynamic equivalence approach to editing in order to make it more available to contemporary people. I have simply tried to take Nevin's work and make it my own, in the sense of comprehending its significance and application. In doing so, I have taken broad license to edit, interpret, clarify and expand what I think Nevin is saying. My efforts will surely annoy Nevin purists, academics and Type A intellectuals who are more concerned with form than content.

Why have I approached *The Mystical Presence* in this way? Actually, it is not that I sat down and planned this approach. It just took on a life of its own. I understand what Nevin said and it has so resonated with me that it dominated me for several months. His book, like no other I have ever read, has brought together various strands of my own life and pursuits in such a way that has astonished me and filled me with joy for having found such a kindred spirit. It is like he is already where I have been trying to get to. I have been working over the past forty years to get where he already was more than a century and a half ago. I'm humbled.

Nevin was the American voice of the German Reformed Church. Having studied under Charles Hodge at Princeton, he accepted a position to lead their only American seminary. It is wonderfully curious that German immigrants would put an American in such a position, but that's what they did. Nevin then called Philip Schaff, a Swiss born, German educated, Christian historian to join him in this effort. They then made a huge splash in the American Christian theological scene, after which Schaff went to Union Seminary to support the cause of liberal Christianity. And Nevin slipped into obscurity and an early retirement. It is often thought that Nevin also fed the liberal Christian stream in America, but that's not what happened. Nevin simply held his theological ground and the world passed him by.

But there has of late been a resurgence of interest in Nevin and Mercersburg Theology. It seems that Nevin is at the center of what is still a little known controversy that has erupted among the conservative Reformed churches (Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA), and the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States (RPCUS) and a few others). Other Christians and denominations outside of these circles will likely be completely unaware of these issues.

That controversy is known as the Federal Vision.<sup>1</sup> The Federal Vision is often confused with the "New Perspective on Paul," another current controversy. The two issues are not the same and must not be conflated. It surfaced in 2002 at a conference entitled "The Federal Vision: An Examination of Reformed Covenantalism," which means that it's new. So the determination of exactly what the Federal Vision actually is and its impact on Christianity today is still in discussion. My concerns here are not for or against the current expressions of the Federal Vision, but for Nevin's contribution to American theology. Nevin will demonstrate that this concern is not new at all, but goes back to the original teachings of the Reformation. It was hotly disputed then and still is today.

These things connect to my life because I was raised and ordained in the United Church of Christ (UCC), the heir of the German Reformed Church in America. And what is even more astonishing to me is that having grown up in, graduated from a UCC seminary and served UCC churches for fifteen years, I had never been exposed to Nevin in any meaningful way. In hindsight, this is all the more significant because it appears that Nevin's ideas provided the original impetus for the founding of the UCC and its initial ecumenical focus. It was Nevin's ecumenical vision of Christianity, supported by Philip Schaff, that provided the central stake for the UCC ecumenical efforts.

And yet, Nevin's name is not associated with the UCC in any significant way, probably because the UCC never actually did anything with Nevin's work. They likely got the idea that something important was afoot

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1 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal\\_Vision](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Vision); <http://www.federal-vision.com/>; [http://www.opc.org/nh.html?article\\_id=478](http://www.opc.org/nh.html?article_id=478); etc.



with Nevin, and got distracted by the excitement of what he was saying and how it blew open the future of Christianity in what was perceived to be a new way, and the UCC went their own way to do their own new thing. Unfortunately, what began as an effort to unite Christianity, the founding of the UCC in 1957, has actually resulted in bringing the most divisive issues into the church that have nothing to do with Nevin. Too bad! Had they run with Nevin, things would have been quite different. Anyway, Nevin connects me with my own Christian roots, which is important to me because I left the UCC more than fifteen years ago for a variety of reasons that are not germane here.

During my undergraduate years of wandering, I studied, both formally in school and informally on my own, philosophy, Eastern religions, mysticism and New Religious Movements. My studies in mysticism led me to many mystics, Eastern and Western, and to Meister Eckhart, whom I adored for a while. I adored him because I thought that I understood what Eckhart was talking about. He was trying to bridge the subjective/objective bifurcation in consciousness in order to provide a greater human integration with God. Eckhart is important because he is one of the preminent Christian mystics, and because Nevin's work corrects Eckhart's error—and that is no small feat! Eckhart continues to have a small and loyal following. So, I pray that Nevin's correction will be clear in the text. It's brilliant!

Nevin was also unapologetically Reformed, which connects to another strand in my life. You might think it not unusual for a person who grew up in and was trained in the UCC to be Reformed, since the UCC claims to be an heir of the Reformation, as well. If so, you may not be aware that not all Reformed are Reformed in the same sense that “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” (Romans 9:6). While Congregationalism began as the most consistent of the Calvinistic Reformed denominations, by 1865 it had mostly lost its Reformed distinctives, though there has always been a small cadre who have soldiered on, who have tried to hold on to Reformed Congregationalism.

I belong to that cohort, though I didn't realize that I was Reformed until I read *Calvin's Commentaries* after a decade of church difficulties as a UCC pastor. These difficulties helped me better understand how far the church has fallen from being “a city set on a hill” (Matthew 5:9) in the new land of America. In the 1600s and early 1700s ninety-five percent of American churches were Reformed.<sup>2</sup> Today, those numbers are completely reversed. Today, there are two versions of Reformed—liberal and conservative. And Nevin faults them both for falling away from the original teachings of the Reformation in a number of ways. No doubt, this played a major role in Nevin's unpopularity among his contemporaries. He had a serious theological dispute with his teacher, Charles Hodge, where Nevin won the

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2 *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, Roger Finke & Rodney Stark, Rutgers University Press, 2005.

argument but Hodge won the day.<sup>3</sup> Popular opinion would not tolerate Nevin's biblical and historical fastidiousness. Of course, those who were not Reformed had little in common with Nevin to begin with. Others in the liberal wing of the Reformed churches liked his ecumenism, but not his biblical and historical integrity. And those of the conservative wing of the Reformed churches took umbrage at his accusation that they, too, had fallen from Reformation teachings. Up with such an accusation they would not put.

Nevin didn't have much respect for Lutheran theology, either. His criticism of consubstantiation put Lutherans in the same category as the Roman Catholics and their transubstantiation. Both, Nevin argued, made the same error, but in different ways. Both mistake Christ's presence in the Eucharist with the physicality of the elements, which blurs the distinctions between spiritual and material by bridging the differences with various ideas of superstition and magic. Transubstantiation takes the hard position of saying that one substance actually becomes another, where consubstantiation takes a muted or blended view by saying that the spiritual substance is locally and materially near the material bread and wine. Nevin rejected both.

There is some speculation that Nevin seriously thought about converting to Roman Catholicism because of his emphasis on the ancient church and the importance of liturgy. But it is hard for me to understand how anyone who has seriously read *The Mystical Presence* could entertain such a thought. Nevin's criticism of transubstantiation is so clear and accurate that he could not possibly convert without losing his own integrity. And besides, the Catholics simply would not have him. I'm not aware that Roman Catholicism has ever dealt with Nevin's criticism of transubstantiation or his doctrine of the mystical presence—nor is it likely that they would be able to, in my opinion. He got an obscure short shrift in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2007.

While *The Mystical Presence* is probably Nevin's most important book, it is also his worst. The edition I worked from is a facsimile of the original 1846 edition by J.P. Lippencott & Co. Why is this edition so bad? Because it seems as if the original editor read and edited the first few chapters, but stopped editing for whatever reasons. It is not simply that Nevin's English is antiquated by today's standards, or that he loves to wax philosophically and mystically eloquent—which he does, but that in too many places the language is too loose and inadequate.

So much so that I was compelled to improve it as best I can simply to understand it. Much mystical writing suffers from excessive fogginess, but Nevin's perspective is too clear for such excesses, at least my understanding of Nevin's perspective is. Short of completing my first reading of the book, I decided to edit the text in order to understand it better myself and bring greater clarity to some of his arguments. At least, that is my intention.

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3 <http://library.lts.org/mercercburg/MercersburgPrimarySources.pdf>

At first, I tried to maintain Nevin's voice, but as I progressed I found myself enthusiastically adding explanations and references to clarify and expand his thoughts simply because I knew exactly what he was saying. He was articulating the same kind of perspective that I have been writing about over the past twenty years. Or at the very least, his perspective and mine are in substantial harmony. Nevin's context and clarity so encouraged me that my own voice simply replaces his at various points. I pray that this will not trouble you, but that it will enhance your understanding of Nevin's perspective—and mine.

My concern has not been to produce a scholarly or intellectual work that accurately preserves Nevin's words or arguments, but to produce a work that honors and makes his arguments better available to people today. Indeed, Nevin is not an easy read. His language is labored and archaic, as was much of the literature of his age. And his ideas are absolutely grandiose by today's standards, but if you can catch on to what he says you will understand the necessity for his largesse.

You may have noticed that old books often have long titles, subtitles and tables of contents. In this case it seems that Nevin was working from an outline, and that outline was used as the table of contents. However, the headings of the table of contents are not found in the text. So, I have integrated them to provide both the outline and the text together in order to both break up the text and improve the readability. In addition, I have added two appendixes to further bolster the arguments. One is an early draft of a thesis by Michael J. Pahls, whom I thank for permission to use it. The other is a selection from John Calvin's Tracts & Letters on The Supper Of Our Lord. Here Calvin makes his position clear.

Nevin's work was very contemporary when it was first published, so he referred to various articles, people and books as if they were common knowledge, too many without references. To acclimate himself to his seminary position and his new denomination, he immersed himself in contemporary (1850s) German theology, philosophy and literature. Consequently, I have added many footnotes to identify the various people and references in the text. In addition, his own footnotes and text are strewn with Latin, Greek and Hebrew—to the point of distraction for today's readers. So, I have endeavored to locate and translate these references so that contemporary readers today can focus on his arguments and not get distracted by the languages. My efforts in this regard are spotty, incomplete and undoubtedly inaccurate in some cases. Again, I readily admit that I am not doing scholarship, and that scholarship is not my contribution here. Nonetheless, I pray that my efforts will be useful for the forwarding of Nevin's work and the Spirit's vision for the future of Christianity in the Twenty-First Century.

Phillip A. Ross  
Marietta, Ohio  
September 2011



## NEVIN'S PREFACE

**T**he following work has grown directly out of some controversy which has had place, during the past year, in the German Reformed Church, on the subject to which it relates. This stands related to it, however, only as an external occasion, and has not been permitted to come into view, in any way, in the work itself. It is not felt that any apology is needed for the publication. This is found in the importance of its subject, which must be left of course to speak for itself.

As the Eucharist forms the very heart of the whole Christian worship, so it is clear that the entire question of the church, which all are compelled to acknowledge, the great life-problem of the age, centers ultimately in the sacramental question as its inmost heart and core. Our view of the Lord's Supper must ever condition and rule in the end our view of Christ's person and the conception we form of the church. It must influence at the same time, very materially, our whole system of theology, as well as all our ideas of ecclesiastical history.

Is it true that the Modern Protestant Church in this country has, in large part at least, fallen away from the sacramental doctrine of the Sixteenth Century? All must at least allow, that there is some room for asking the question. If so, it is equally plain that it is a question which is entitled to a serious answer. For in the nature of the case, such a falling away, if it exist at all, must be connected with a still more general removal from the original platform of the church. The Eucharistic doctrine of the Sixteenth Century was interwoven with the whole church system of the time. To give it up, then, would involve a renunciation in principle, if not in profession, of this whole system in its radical, distinctive constitution.

If it can be shown that no material change has taken place, were this system to be given up, it should be immediately done. Or if the change should be allowed, and vindicated as a legitimate advance of the original Protestant faith, we must be open to such a change. This study will let us know where we are and what we actually believe regarding this central question, as we examine the theological standpoint of our Catechisms and Confessions of Faith.

The relationship between the Eucharist and the idea of the true church, will easily be observed by every well-informed and reflecting person. If the fact of the incarnation is the principle and source of a new supernatural order of life for humanity itself, then the church is not based on an abstraction. Then the church must involve a true, living, divine-human constitution that exists in the world. Such a church will be organic in its nature—not a device or contrivance ingeniously fitted to serve certain purposes beyond itself, but the necessary, essential form of Christianity, in whose presence alone it is possible to intelligently conceive of piety in its individual manifestations.

The life of the individual Christian can be real and healthy only as it is born from the life of the church, and carried by the church to the end. We are Christians individually, by partaking in the general life-revelation of Christ, which is already at hand organically in the church, the living and life-giving body of Jesus Christ. Because it is real and organic, Christianity must also be historical. No greater wrong can be done to the church than to call in question its true historical character. To do so is to turn it into a phantasm, and to overthrow the objective basis on which its foundations eternally rest.

It must too be historical in its form and constitution because the reality of Christianity demands the presence of the actual life of Christ, flowing in unbroken continuity from the beginning as the medium of all particular union with him from age to age. Then, again, the historical church must be visible, not merely ideal but actual. The actual church may indeed fall immeasurably short of the idea it represents. The visible church may be imperfect, corrupt, false to its own conception and calling, but still be an actual, continuously visible church in the world. This must be so if Christianity is to have either truth or reality in the form of a new creation. A purely invisible, other worldly church is a *contradictio in adjecto* (a contradiction in terms) because the very idea of a church implies the actual manifestation of religious life as something social and common.

The idea that the externalization of the Christian life is merely accidental to the constitution of this life itself is exceedingly derogatory to the church, and injurious in its bearings on religion and society. An outward, visible church is the necessary form of the new creation in Christ Jesus, by its very nature. And it must continue to be so throughout both time and eternity alike. Outward, visible social worship is to be regarded as something essential to piety itself. A religion without externals, must always be a false fantasy. The simple expression of religious feeling is needed for the perfection of the feeling itself because the spirit is objectively real. The Holy Spirit himself is a constituent element of the very life of Christianity.

As a real, human, historical constitution in the world, the visible and invisible parts of the church cannot be divorced without peril to everything that is most precious in the Christian faith. We have no right to set the invisible in opposition to the visible, the spiritual in opposition to the cor-

poreal, in religion. The incarnation of the Son of God is the principle form and the true measure and test of all sound Christianity. To be real, the divinity of Jesus Christ must ever externalize its inward, visible life. All thinking, feeling, every spiritual state, must manifest bodily in order to be fully real. This is the proper, deep sense of all liturgy in religion.

This necessity is universal. The more intensely spiritual any state may be, the more irresistibly will it express itself to make itself complete, in an external form. Put away the idea, then, that the visible church is incidental to its true constitution, that is is a cunningly framed device for advancing some interest or another. To think of the church, and of Christian worship, simply as a means to something else is to dishonor religion itself in the most serious manner.

If the present work may serve to fix attention on the momentous point with which it is concerned, and contribute even indirectly to a clearer understanding of Christian truth, I shall feel that it has not been written in vain. May God accept it, and crown it with his blessing.

J. W. N.  
Mercersburg, April, 1846.

## PRELIMINARY ESSAY

**I**n the January edition of the *Theologische Studien und Kriliken*, 1845, there is an admirable article, from the pen of Dr. C. Ullmann,<sup>4</sup> Professor in Heidelberg, on "The Distinctive Character Of Christianity," well worth careful study by all who have an interest in the present condition of the church. It has occurred to me that I cannot do better in the way of introducing the present work, than to furnish here a full abstract, or rather a free compressed translation of its valuable contents.

### I. OBJECT AND NATURE OF THE INQUIRY

Christianity has always been substantially the same. The way it has understood itself, however, has varied with the unfolding progress of its history. At the beginning it was the fresh life of childhood, without reflection. The first efforts toward a Christian theology were gradually produced during the first centuries through apologetic controversies and their various errors. After the Fourth Century the entire intellectual strength of the church appeared to be devoted to settling and establishing particular doctrines, but still however only in their individual forms. The Scholastic period of the Middle Ages took up those individual doctrines and worked to reduce them to an overall general theological system. Throughout this process of theological development, however, the distinctive constitution of Christianity as a whole, as compared with other forms of religion, barely came into view.

Even the Reformers of the Sixteenth Century, thoroughly imbued as they were with its living spirit, were too fully occupied with the work of setting it free from church oppression to bestow much reflection on this point. The question has been reserved for the Modern Period, which has felt a cer-

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<sup>4</sup> The distinguished author of the work *Reformatoren vor der Reformation* (found in *History of the Christian Church*, by Philip Schaff. Volume VII. *Modern Christianity: The German Reformation*); for full historical knowledge, comprehensive views, clear, calm reflection, and masterly power of representation, one of the finest living writers certainly of Germany. The article here noticed has been published also as a separate pamphlet, and seems to have attracted more than usual attention. A new work, I may add, is recently announced from the same writer under the interesting title, *The Church of the Future*, in which no doubt the same views are more fully exhibited.



tain urgency for philosophical and historical cultivation to give it much attention. During the last fifty years (1800-1850) numerous attempts have been made to determine the characteristic nature and genius of Christianity, always reflecting their own particular theological assumptions. In this way, Storr made the primary distinction to be the supernatural, the miraculous, the positive, as found in Christian religion. Herder<sup>5</sup> saw in it the character of universal humanity; Chateaubriand,<sup>6</sup> its sublime and captivating beauty. But we owe the Christological struggles of the Modern era to define more clearly the true nature of Christianity, and its central constitution.

The theological position of the present time may be considered especially favorable, for a proper appreciation of the truth in the case of the important inquiry here brought into view. Previously, it was too common to proceed to prove some particular conception of Christianity, whether Primitive, Catholic, Protestant, etc. A denomination would make some single historical issue, often arbitrarily chosen by the pleasure of the inquirer, to be a matter of necessity and to stand for the whole. This caused certain elements of the system to represent the whole, whether its divinity for instance, or its humanity, its doctrinal, or its ethical, or perhaps its aesthetic character.

Now however, as the result of our historical maturity, we stand on higher ground. We are able to take a comprehensive survey of Christianity as an organic whole and evaluate all the aspects—its origin and development down to the present time. As a result, it is much easier to see the true life center of the whole, and to recognize its beating heart, which continues to perpetually animate both the whole and in its several parts.

When we speak of the distinctive character of Christianity, it implies the idea of something universal as well as particular in its composition. As universal it is *religion*; as particular it is the *Christian religion*. But these two constructs, in the case of Christianity, are inseparably bound together.<sup>7</sup> We cannot abstract from Christianity its particular unique character, and

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- 5 Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744 -1803) was a German philosopher, theologian, poet, and literary critic. He is associated with the periods of Enlightenment. He turned away from the light of the eighteenth century. Seeking to reconcile his thought with this earlier age, Herder sought to harmonize his conception of sentiment with reason, whereby all knowledge is implicit in the soul; the most elementary stage is sensuous and intuitive perception which by development can become self-conscious and rational. To Herder, this development is the harmonizing of primitive and derivative truth, of experience and intelligence, feeling and reason.
  - 6 François-René, vicomte de Chateaubriand (1768-1848) was a French writer, politician, diplomat and historian. He is considered the founder of Romanticism in French literature.
  - 7 They are not two unique constructs, but one bound together in trinitarian unity. For more on trinitarian unity see *Arsy Varsy—Reclaiming the Gospel in First Corinthians* (2008), *Varsy Arsy, Proclaiming the Gospel in Second Corinthians* (2009), *Colossians—Christos Singularis* (2010) by Phillip A. Ross, Pilgrim Platform, Marietta, Ohio.

leave the idea of universal religion behind. Christianity must necessarily actually exist in its unique form, or it is nothing, a mere abstraction that is devoid of all reality.

Christianity is not first and foremost a religion, with something added to it to make it Christianity. Rather, as religion itself—not merely a specific kind or category of religion but the phenomena of human religion—it is at the same time in its most central identity, this particular form of religion, exclusively complete and whole in and of itself. Yet it is distinct in all its parts from every other religion, by the living Spirit which pervades the whole. Thus, it is individual and universal at the same time. It claims to be the absolute truth itself, not simply *a* religion, as one among many, but the one, universal, all perfect religion of humanity in its widest, fullest and most complete sense. What is both universal and individual in Christianity flow together, and cannot be considered to be different things.

## 2. HISTORICAL FORMS OF CHRISTIANITY—PARALLEL IN THE GENERAL PROGRESS OF MODERN REFLECTION ON ITS NATURE

The Modern period has brought to the fore a conscious reflection about the nature of Christianity. This consideration has its own history, which reveals the progressive unfolding of a uniquely universal perspective. This perspective provides both correspondence and contrast with previous perspectives that have provided an understanding of Christianity from its inception. The defining spirit of Christianity has grown and changed over time, much like a person who has changed with age yet has not become something different than previously known, but has simply become more of what he has always been. This process of mature inquiry has been more rapid in the Modern period because of its many efforts to determine the essential and real character of Christianity as a whole, rather than trying to prove a particular version or denominational expression of Christianity.

This effort began with the examination of the character of the new life, purportedly generated in the lives of Christians. This new life is found with complete harmony and perfection in the person of its Founder—Jesus Christ. This new life is exhibited more inadequately in the stories and records of apostles and the apostolic churches. However, the mere existence of this new life was not sufficient to our understanding. It is necessary for Christians to come to a free and complete apprehension of what it involves. Such an effort requires the separation and reintegration of the various elements that previously brought confusion, conflict and sectarian one-sidedness. The only way to do this is to grow beyond our own childishness, and from the simplicity of the childhood of Christianity itself, to the consciousness of a greater spiritual maturity. We must understand the long course of development revealed to us through the history of Christianity as a whole.

In the process, the different constituent elements or forces included in Christianity must be ordered in the light of the whole and not simply given the position or importance they have claimed for themselves. Some things are more important than others, and some have been defined by the general character of the historical age in which they found expression. Thus, for every period of history there are particular elements of Christianity that have taken preeminence. By considering the whole of Christianity we are able to order the various parts in the light of the whole and see them, not as separate manifestations, but symmetrically united as a perfect whole that belongs to the one glorious life of Jesus Christ.

This process naturally began with the examination of doctrine in an attempt to resolve the various conflicting doctrines into a harmonious doctrinal whole. This dogma-producing period extended from the Fourth Century to the Sixth. This effort was dominated by Greek philosophy through the emphasis on the special vocation of those engaged in philosophical analysis. With the collapse of the Roman Empire, and the rise of a new life among the western nations, Christianity changed its focus. Moving from being the concern of intellectuals and the higher classes, Christianity became the foundation for manners, morals, culture and the social order that regulated the life of the general population.

Accordingly, the main interest at this point in its development became moral authority. Particularly in the hands of the Roman Church it became a system of Law, a teaching institution for social control and civil government. In this regard, however, it encouraged the opportunity to make the historical contrast between law and gospel, a distinction that particularly effected the German spirit.<sup>8</sup>

This new development included in its very core a passion for evangelical freedom from the abuses of social control and domination by the forces of both state and church. Gradually this movement asserted its ecclesiastical independence. With the Reformation, Christianity grew from being a social minority to a majority and reclaimed its proper foundation by emphasizing the Five Solas.<sup>9</sup> Here it reclaimed the importance of personal redemption, the justification of the sinner before God, and the principle of freedom for the consciousness of the justified person himself in all his relations.

Along with these three leading ideas of Christianity, 1) as doctrine, 2) as a system of law, and 3) as a source of redemption and spiritual freedom, we find a fourth idea unfolding from an early period with steadily increasing strength. It is the idea that makes religion generally to consist in idea of the union of man with God. And this is particularly prominent with Christianity, particularly among the Christian mystics. In this regard, Christian-

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8 A reference to the fact that the Reformation began with Martin Luther in Germany.

9 *Sola scriptura* (by Scripture alone), *Sola fide* (by faith alone), *Sola gratia* (by grace alone), *Solus Christus* or *Solo Christo* (Christ alone or through Christ alone), *Soli Deo gloria* (glory to God alone).

ity is regarded as the perfect religion because it fully unites the divine and human in the life of Jesus Christ.

This idea, which originates in remote antiquity, comes to the fore more decidedly in the mysticism of the middle ages. And appears now (1850s) to be completely revealed in the philosophical and theological speculation of the Modern time.<sup>10</sup> From the beginning this scholarly speculation can be grouped into two opposite categories: one is pantheistic in that it recognizes God in everything, and the other is monotheistic, recognizing a uniquely individual God. Of the two, pantheism has become more popular today, but in the final analysis monotheism must be regarded as the only legitimate way to conceptualize the God of the Bible, and is expected one day to prevail universally.<sup>11</sup>

And these are the foundational religious categories (the universal and the individual) by which Christianity itself has been differently conceived in the varying historical circumstances. These two conceptions of Christianity manifest as different forms of church life. The interest in doctrine is found in the Orthodox Church or the church of Christian Antiquity, which holds to the early expressions of Christianity dominated by Greek thought. As an institution of discipline, Christianity found its essential character in the Roman Church, with its claim of universal authority, giving itself the title Catholic, the church of the Middle Ages. Claiming the idea of redemption and freedom, the German Church came to the forefront, calling itself Evangelical, the church of the Reformation.

The final church, in which all these stages of development are to be brought together in unity as the true form of Christianity will focus on the actualization of life in unity with God though union with Christ. Toward this church we find ourselves in the midst of ecclesiastical agitation regarding the foundation and character of the church of the future. In this study we will define the foundational attributes of Christianity as spirituality, catholicity, and Evangelical freedom, united in the trinitarian unity that retains the character of the whole without denying the uniqueness of the constituent parts.

This historically progressive theological revelation of Christ in the world corresponds with the actual, bodily manifestation of Christ in the church. This phenomenon is reflected in Modern theology and has been described as the successive historical stages of: 1) as doctrine, 2) as an ethical law, 3) as a system of redemption, and ultimately, though not always in the same way, 4) as a religion based on real, actual union with God. This progression involves a change from a merely outward focus to an increasingly inward focus. How so?

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10 A reference to the burst of Modern religious interest and scholarship, much of it coming out of Germany, and to Nevin's burgeoning relationship with Philip Schaff, one of the most prolific authors of Christian history ever.

11 What will prevail is Christian monotheism, which is trinitarian monotheism or monotheistic trinitarianism.

Christianity was naturally and historically conceived first as doctrine, following God's order of creation where God first spoke things into existence. Next Christianity became interested in the application of its doctrine and began to focus on ethical concerns. This process is an example of Christian teleology, of how God declares a thing to be so from the beginning, and then draws the thing into increasing conformity with His declaration. Christianity's highest moral expression is found in the fact of redemption and atonement, which centers on the person of Christ. The completion of the process focuses on the necessity for the Redeemer to be both divine and human for the redemption and atonement to take effect. Humanity is reconciled with God, first by manifesting actual forgiveness in the hearts and lives of his people, and then by manifesting (or growing) Christ's righteousness in them. God and man are only reconciled inasmuch as they are actually united in these two ways as the foundation of actual redemption.

As might be expected these four stages of Christianity are closely related to the various forms of religion in the world. And if Christianity is to be considered to be the absolute expression of the universal religion, it must actually manifest in the character and lives of real people. When primarily seen as doctrine, Christianity finds support in the idea of religion as a mode of knowing God. This can best be seen as the prevailing definition of Christianity among the Orthodox, particularly preceding Kant.<sup>12</sup>

The next stage of development grew out of the philosophy of Kant, who said that religion was no more than morality. Evangelical Christianity defined redemption as a state or feeling of moral awareness. However, the actual relationship of man to God in religion does not come from human understanding, will, or feeling alone. Rather, real relationship with God includes them all as a whole in the actual reality of one's personal life. Because of the reality of the wholeness of thought and life, for Christianity to actually be real and not a mere idea, it must actually produce the union of God and humanity. It is in this way alone that Christianity can be said to actually be only the source of all light and holiness and salvation.

The first three stages have different measures of truth, different ideas about what religious truth is. For the fourth stage to actually be what it purports to be requires that all of the other three stages are also actually true, manifestly true in actual human life, all at the same time. In addition, this fourth stage must embrace and include the first three, in the sense that the biblical idea of perfection is wholeness or completeness.

Christianity can only be properly regarded as the actual union of God and humanity where its doctrinal, ethical, and soteriological character are

<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), German philosopher whose contributions to metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics had a profound impact on almost every philosophical movement that followed him. Kant ushered in The Enlightenment, a movement of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that emphasized the use of reason to scrutinize previously accepted doctrines and traditions and that brought about many humanitarian reforms.

constituent elements of its original, inalienable nature, and are not mere thoughts or ideas but actual facts of history and life. This definition naturally excludes all religious pantheism because from the pantheistic perspective God has nothing to unite with.

Christianity is the unique revelation of the living God historically united in the person of Christ in order to redeem humanity from the power of sin. This redemption involves the union of God and man by definition. The proper expression of this union is not “the unity of the divine and human,” which lacks historical specificity and is liable to be taken in a pantheistic sense. A more definite and concrete expression is “the union of God and you.” God doesn’t unite with some generic idea of humanity, but with specific individuals. If this union is not actually manifest in your own individual person, you cannot know if Christianity is actually real because Christianity is more than the mere idea of such union.

### 3. CONCEPTION OF CHRISTIANITY AS DOCTRINE

Modern theology first defined itself in terms of doctrine. This was done in two ways. The whole Bible was assumed to be true because God himself accredited it so. It was received on his authority alone, without any regard to the historical character of the text or of the actual man, Jesus Christ. It was simply considered to be the first manifestation of a theory of rational religion as defined by logic and reason themselves, which when divested of its original temporary covering (Judaism) would reveal its proper everlasting truth. Judaism, understood to be natural religion, would give way to Christianity, understood to be supernatural religion. From this perspective, naturalism and supernaturalism, which first seemed to be opposed to one another, both serve to define Christianity as essentially doctrinal in character.

However, an important difference began to take shape. Supernaturalism infused the biblical texts and stories of miracles with a fantastic character that seemed to defy both logic and reason. It suggested that the Redeemer had a kind of ethereal, other worldly character. It posited some kind of spiritual realm that was different from the ordinary world of everyday life.

Naturalism, on the other hand, had a strong aversion, distrust and disbelief in everything tainted with an ethereal, other worldly character. It dismissed the various stories of biblical miracles because they understood them to violate logic, reason and common experience. Naturalists required religion to be concrete and historical, and could not retain a sense of supernaturalism in the person of Christ.

This early expression of theology suffered from a tendency to attribute to supernaturalism what should be attributed to the person of Jesus Christ, to think of Christ as ethereal and other worldly. Naturalism makes the opposite error, that of denying what should be attributed to the person of

Christ because it denies the reality of what is supernatural. The naturalists went so far as to wish that Jesus' name might be concealed from the world, so that people could enjoy the benefit of the natural truths he taught, without being deceived by a superstitious misunderstanding of the teacher himself. They wanted to purge Jesus of any supposed supernatural characteristics, stories or teachings—in order to understand Jesus as real.

From a supernatural or “religious” perspective, naturalism is thought of only as a spiritual curiosity that belongs to other times. The supernaturalists became the theological conservatives, but their perspective could fare no better. The supernaturalists completely failed to understand or explain the unique character of Christianity. They found the essence of reality to be found in an ideal, other worldly, Platonic realm of pure form, purely idealistic in character. Thus, they were particularly suited to define Christianity as doctrine—ideas.

However, the truest definition of religion and the whole history of Christianity contradict such a thought. Religion obviously includes knowledge (thoughts and ideas) as one of its essential elements, but to conceive of Christianity as nothing more than an intellectual endeavor is to completely miss the proverbial boat. Love of God and neighbor are central to Christianity, and actually loving God and neighbor require more than mere ideas. Real Christianity requires a pervading sense of dependence on God, communion with him and complete self-surrender to his presence and will.

The natural/supernatural division of reality is a false dichotomy. Reality itself is composed of no such division. Such ideas are simply a product of human imagination.

If religion consisted of doctrine alone, it might be fully imparted, like logic or mathematics, by definition and demonstration. It might simply be teachable. But this is impossible. Don't get me wrong, instruction is obviously required. However, the proper creative impulse of genuine religious life cannot be found in the mere teaching of thoughts and ideas. This creative impulse must come to individuals from outside of themselves. The desire for unity necessarily implies that there is something outside of one's self to be united with. And the idea of the reality of something outside of one's self can only come from outside of one's self. And as it is with the individual, so it is with the human race. The idea of humanity as a whole with God can only issue from outside of humanity as a whole.

Teachers of religion can only accomplish their commission through representation. They must actually represent what they intend to teach. They must teach by example, not simply by instruction. The heart of religion must be caught before it can be taught. People cannot teach what they do not know, neither can they show what they do not have. Compared to example and actual life experience, instruction is cold and dead.

Religion is real only inasmuch as it feeds and reproduces. Indeed, the definition of life is “the condition that distinguishes organisms from inorganic objects and dead organisms, being manifested by growth through

*metabolism, reproduction, and the power of adaptation to environment through changes originating internally.*” Only life can beget life.

Pack as much as you can imagine into a doctrine and it will always fall immeasurably short of what is meant by religion in its actual living character. To make doctrine synonymous with religion is completely contradictory. Thoughts and ideas about divine things cannot produce genuine piety, much less may they be taken for such piety itself. Genuine piety is to be distinguished from Pietism, the movement, originating in the Lutheran Church in Germany in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, that stressed personal piety over religious formality and orthodoxy. Pietism has simply created another false dichotomy. Clearly, genuine religion cannot be a matter of mere doctrine, for to be such is to divest it of its actual life.

Of course, religion involves doctrine, but not in the Modern sense of being a system of abstract propositions and logical proofs. These kinds of thought systems have founded various schools, as the Greeks know, but never a church or world religion. Philosophies can neither eat nor reproduce, though they corrupt and conflate. Religion is primarily proclamation or testimony that something inexplicable has actually happened. It is not an abstract thought about what happened, as if it intends to fill people’s minds with various thoughts and ideas.

Religion is, rather, a communication about an actual, historical occurrence. It is not a sterile, abstract occurrence without consequence or effect in the world, but it requires a response. Real religion involves a transaction, such as the comprehension of a system of religious truths that require assent and conformity because they circumscribe the reality of human existence. Religion provides the context for existence, individual and corporate.

Religion as doctrine follows what God has actually done in order to provide for the perfection of God’s action, its wholeness and completeness. But still the doctrines, the ideas, the thoughts in-and-of-themselves have no power to generate life. Ideas only produce more ideas, only life can produce life. Therefore, the power of religion only comes from the presence of life. And in this case, this life must be greater than humanity, greater than any individual life and greater than all corporate life. The unity is greater than what is unified for the same reason and in the same way that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Christianity, being derived from Christ, describes or points to something that must exist in the teacher himself. The teaching is simply the verbal, experiential expression of this life. Thus, the apostles and evangelists, who were the heralds of Christian salvation, preceded doctrine. They came before the working out of the intricacies of Christian doctrine. And they preceded the teachers of doctrine.

In every stage, the church always begins with testimony, and only later proceeds to analysis and instruction. The power of doctrine always results



from the actual life which originally belongs to the founder of the religion, and proceeds directly from the founder to his people.

In the case of Christianity, the action of God through the incarnation of Christ doesn't only have historical significance as something that has actually happened, but has doctrinal significance as the realization of the highest expression of religious ideals. These ideals have been abstracted from the historical facts, and put into a system of interrelated ideas, both popular and scholarly.

So, for theologians in particular, because they are most occupied with thinking about religion, Christianity has the semblance of being a self-contained set of doctrinal propositions. Theologians, then, are particularly susceptible to the philosophical error of confounding doctrine with the actual object that the doctrine represents. Indeed, those who think for a living tend to think that thinking is life. But, indeed, life is more than mere thought. Obviously, doctrine is the means of Christian instruction, but the means and the end must not be conflated. In-and-of-itself, Christianity is life—living power, a revelation of the Spirit in the form of doctrine. Doctrine that is devoid of life only produces more doctrine. Only life can produce life.

Even if Christianity is mainly regarded as doctrine, we must still ask about what makes Christian doctrine in particular unique among all religious doctrine. It's uniqueness is not found in any of its many religious or moral propositions. In fact, Christianity has much in common with other religions. Rather, Christianity's uniqueness consists in what Jesus Christ says about himself and his relationship with God. It also consists of humanity's new relationship with God that He brought the human family as a consequence of His death. It also consists of the testimony of the Apostles concerning his person and work. All of these things result from the nature and character of Jesus Christ, second person of the Trinity. Among all of the world's religions, Christianity alone is trinitarian.

With the mention of the Trinity we immediately find ourselves beyond the realm of ideas and doctrine. In the light of the Trinity we are brought to the reality of religion, to the creative power of life—God himself, revealed in and as Jesus Christ. The most essential aspect of Christ's mission in the world is his self-revelation, his self-exhibition of his humanity in unity with his divinity. This revelation concerns his whole life—birth to death to resurrection. It includes his testimony concerning himself, and the account of the impression (likeness) he made on others.

Consequently, words and doctrines do belong to Christianity. But the *part* must not be mistaken for the *whole* because it is the holistic wholeness<sup>13</sup> of Christianity that makes it unique among the world's religions. This wholeness does not consist of Christian doctrine alone—though it is part of it. Rather, the uniqueness of Christianity is found in the trinitarian

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13 Holistic: Emphasizing the organic or functional relation between parts and the whole. Wholeness: An undivided or unbroken completeness or totality with nothing lacking.

Life of its founder, Jesus Christ. Only inasmuch as Christ actually is the God of creation, is Christianity the light of the world. Jesus did not say that his doctrine is the truth that he brought to the world. He said:

- “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst” (John 6:35).
- “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12).
- “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58).
- “I am the door of the sheep” (John 10:7).
- “I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep” (John 10:11).
- “I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live” (John 11:25).
- “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6).
- “I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you” (John 14:20).
- “I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman” (John 15:1).
- “And all mine are thine, and thine are mine; and I am glorified in them” (John 17:10).

#### 4. CONCEPTION OF CHRISTIANITY AS MORAL LAW

The next historic development in Christian understanding placed the distinctive character of Christianity in the realm of ethics, emphasizing its power as a rule of life. This closely followed Kant’s categorical division of reason, morality and aesthetics into separate and distinct areas of inquiry. Rationalism followed in the train of Kant’s work. Kant and the Rationalists taught that the human mind can have no certain knowledge of the supernatural or divine in a theoretical way, unlike the certainty of reason and logic. Moral certainty can only be presumed as an act of obedience to the demands of our moral nature.

What morality requires as a postulate for its own support may be relied upon as true, even though it is logically unknowable. In this regard moral law became an absolute measure of truth in its own realm. Morality became more reliable than religion, which became a secondary and subordinate concern, necessary only as required by morality for its own purposes. This change caused Christianity to be seen primarily as an ethical law, beginning as divine precepts, but in the final analysis religion was understood as the demand of morality, what Kant called practical reason.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, Christ was the great lawgiver for humanity and the church

<sup>14</sup> The *Critique of Practical Reason* is the second of Immanuel Kant’s three critiques, first published in 1788. It follows on from his *Critique of Pure Reason* and deals with his moral philosophy, as his *Critique of Judgment* deals with aesthetics.

was a platform for the grand struggle between good and evil in history. The ideas of faith and God's judgment were resolved into the mere confidence that virtue would prevail. Religion became faith in the moral order of the world.

We acknowledge the importance of this ethical idea in Christianity. It represents progress beyond the idea that Christianity is merely doctrinal and it puts Christianity's teleological character in a better light by suggesting that Christianity as a whole is bringing about a moral conclusion. It also put more attention on the author of Christianity as the center of the whole system, though still only in an idealistic way. It kept the age to which it belonged on good terms with Christianity by making Christianity more real because of its focus on morality. Nonetheless, Christian morality is only part of the reality of the whole of Christianity.

Thinking that Christianity is nothing more than morality produced a false idea because it overlooked what is most unique about Christianity—its trinitarian character. Christian piety requires more than moral behavior because it is a means for an end beyond the believer. Christianity is not simply morality, it is creative. Its central concerns are redemption, atonement and grace, which are overlooked by this moral understanding. Christianity is not simply a moral imperative, it is a fulfillment and satisfaction. It is not a request for God to do something, it's a divine gift that produces obedience out of gratefulness rather than duty. Duty, which was Kant's central concern, is nothing to the Christian because love is everything. And love obeys because of its own desire, without command or duty. The categorical imperative is irrelevant in the face of love. "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

When understood either as doctrine or morality (law), the primary difference between Christianity and other religions cannot be seen. Were Christianity merely a system of doctrine, even if was infinitely perfect, it would not be different from other religions or philosophies. Sure, Christianity provides a better system of law and morality, but if that is all there is to it, it would still be classified with Judaism and Islam as a biblical religion. At best it would be no more than a better version of Judaism or Islam, and not a different category of religion that is completely unique among religions.

In both cases the explanation of how Christianity is the foundation and source of the regeneration of human life would not be possible. Rather, we must agree with Paul and John that Christ is the source of a completely new order of humanity and world history. The explanation of how Christianity can provide new birth for believers and new forms of thinking, of how the Christian church and all that it includes is not simply a new idea or a higher morality, but is actually a new creation of the same kind as the creation of Adam in Genesis.

## 5. THE RELIGION OF REDEMPTION

To see this unique character of Christianity as new, original, and different from all other religions, Schleiermacher,<sup>15</sup> who was more historical than the Rationalists, sought to refer everything back to its ultimate ground or living root—the person of Christ himself. He attempted to redeem the reality of the central orthodox beliefs of Christianity from their complete dismissal by the Rationalists. In doing so, he portrayed Christ, not simply as a teacher or lawgiver, but as having the actual power of God to actually redeem the world through the regeneration of humanity.

Schleiermacher did not deny that Christianity is doctrinal or ethical, but found it to be primarily teleological.<sup>16</sup> He thought that it was necessary for Christianity to be completely and uniquely different from all other religions, monotheistic or pagan in order to have complete historical integrity. He found this uniqueness in the realization of redemption provided by the person of Jesus Christ. Of course, this idea is also found in other religions, but those religions make redemption the result of various human accom-

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15 Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768-1834) was a German theologian and philosopher who attempted to reconcile the criticisms of the Enlightenment with traditional Protestant orthodoxy. In Nevin's day he represented one of the highest expressions of Christian theology. Because of his profound impact on subsequent Christian thought, he is often called the "Father of Modern Liberal Theology." Had Modern theologians been as influenced by Nevin, history would be quite different.

From Leibniz, Lessing, Fichte, Jacobi and the Romantic schools of Idealists Schleiermacher found a deeply mystical understanding of the inner depths of the human personality. His religious thought found its expression most notably in his book *The Christian Faith*, a systematic effort considered by many to be one of the true classics of Christian theology.

He described the ego/individual as an individualization of universal reason, and the primary act of self-consciousness as the conjunction of universal and individual life, the union of the universe with reason incarnate. Thus, every person is a specific and original representation of the universe and a compendium of humanity, a microcosm in which the world is immediately reflected. Though individuals cannot attain perfect unity of thought and being by either cognition or volition, they can find it in their own personalities as a sort of immediate self-consciousness or feeling (which are identical in Schleiermacher's terminology). This *feeling*, described as the minimum of distinct antithetic consciousness or the cessation of the antithesis of subject and object, constitutes the unity of our being. Because this feeling provides the essential fact of self-consciousness, religion lies at the basis of all thought and action.

At various periods of his life Schleiermacher used different terms to represent the character and relation of *religious feeling*. In his earlier days he called it a feeling or intuition of the universe, consciousness of the unity of reason and nature, of the infinite and the eternal within the finite and the temporal. In later life he described it as the feeling of absolute dependence, or, as meaning the same thing, the consciousness of being in relation to God.

16 Teleology: a necessarily theological explanation of phenomena by their ends or purposes. For instance, a flower is not pushed into the light by the biological character of its roots, but is drawn into the light by God's definition (purpose) of what He intends it to be.

plishments—purifications, penances, offerings, etc.—and an object of future realization, usually in another life.

The realization of Christian redemption is quite different. Christ doesn't simply order and prescribe the process of redemption, but actually accomplishes the whole work in himself in the present, not merely in the future. Thus, Christian redemption is not merely accomplished *by* him, but *in* him and *through* him. Furthermore, it is accomplished by the most perfect and all-sufficient form—his person. He can do this because he alone is in complete, sinless, trinitarian union with God. Thus, the person of Jesus Christ is himself the redemption he manifests in the world by his reality of the Christian Trinity. Moses was simply the medium through which God provided his law, and the law was for Moses as much as for others.

Not so with Christ! The religion of Christ is the person of Christ. It was not merely given by him, but is manifest *in him*, and it remains in him forever because he is its only perfect source. Christian redemption is the person of the everlasting Redeemer, who alone is without peer. If the idea of religious redemption is true, it can only be true in the person who Himself actually constitutes redemption in the real world in which people currently live. And if it is real, people will necessarily be conscious of it as an actuality in their own lives.

This definition of religion provides an important advance beyond the definitions of religion as mere doctrine or morality. Doctrine pertains to knowledge alone, law or morality pertains only to the will, but actual religious redemption must be more than mere thought, intention, feeling or consciousness. Actual redemption necessarily includes the whole human being, head and heart, body and soul. This definition of religion involves a more complete, a more whole and satisfying definition of religion than any other.

Understood this way, Christianity takes on an actual, concrete historical character. It is not just an idea or an institution, but an actual person. Christianity is not just an idea, not even an idea about someone who lived a long time ago. Rather, Christianity is a dynamic reality that actually exists as a person in the lives of believers in this present world. It is not communicated through an imperial authority from on high (which it is), but it is communicated through the personal freedom and power it provides for its adherents. What is subjectively experienced as regeneration in the lives of believers is objectively manifest as historical fact in the world. These qualities of Christianity go far beyond all previous definitions of religion, and endue it with perfect and complete uniqueness in the annals of religious and philosophical history.

Indeed, the theology of Schleiermacher has provided a categorical advance beyond the previous definitions of Christianity in merely doctrinal or ethical terms. All serious seekers of Truth can now understand that the religion of Christianity is not simply a doctrine but is a person. Christianity is the actual, living person of Jesus Christ, alive in human history as the

source of a renewed human kind that unfolds continuously, freely and in accordance with its own law. This renewed human kind exists in Christ, in the character of the only real Redeemer. No other religion before or since has ever exhibited anything like this, as the reader of this book will come to appreciate.

Yet, there remains a final requirement for a complete definition of human religion that is not yet clear. There is a serious defect in Schleiermacher's theology regarding his understanding of the unique character of Christianity. His idea of Christian redemption does in fact provide a significant advance regarding the foundational character of Christianity, but his deficiency concerns his understanding and appreciation of the relationship between sin and atonement. Redemption assumes the effectiveness of atonement, and atonement assumes the seriousness of sin.

Actual reconciliation with God will always produce the personal confidence of actually being reconciled. Because actual reconciliation and redemption are the products of atonement, they follow where atonement has led. Atonement bridges the gap or amends for the wrong so that reconciliation and redemption may manifest. Therefore, the idea of atonement must take precedence over the idea of redemption regarding the definition of Christianity.

Notice also that redemption is subjective in that it effects individuals at the level of personal experience by delivering the person from the power of sin. In contrast, atonement is objective in that it happens outside of a person before it happens to the person. God must actually be atoned before that atonement can be applied to individuals. Atonement establishes a right relationship between God and humanity as a whole or class before it can be applied to specific, individual human beings.

Schleiermacher almost exclusively limits himself to the subjective character of religion by defining it as a form of feeling or individual consciousness. And it is completely inadequate to the character of religion to define its central characteristic in such subjective terms, to the near exclusion of the objective reality that paves the way for redemption to follow. Piety that is genuine, complete and well-grounded embodies both understanding (doctrine) and will (morality) as essential elements of its constitution. Christianity obviously includes such piety in order to actually provide personal redemption.

But Christianity is infinitely more than mere piety. It is not merely the revelation of God's redemption, but is also and more-so the revelation of the character of God. Christianity reveals the character of God in the perfect wholeness of the Trinity. And that wholeness is shown to be more perfect by the fact of its actual reality. Christianity reveals God to be a merciful and just but loving Father, an obedient and sinless servant who is the Son of the Father, and a powerful, careful and Holy Spirit who actually accomplishes what God intends in human history.

This definition goes far beyond mere subjective individuality, and provides an infinitely more complete definition than that of mere redemption. This is the actual atonement that Christianity alone provides and which overflows the mere definition of religion with meaning and reality. Both redemption and atonement are the work of Jesus Christ on the cross for the world. They are spiritual works, of course. And for spiritual work to be real, it must manifest in a particular form of existence or some particular person in human history. If, for instance, redemption and atonement exist for God only with regard to humanity in general and not for any particular human beings, then it would fall short of actually being real in this world.

This requirement is also necessary in the case of Jesus Christ. His spiritual work on the cross is only real inasmuch as he himself is real. It can only affect this world if he was an actual human being in this world. And because his work of redemption in the world rests on his prior work of atonement with God, it is necessary that Christ's character be such that it actually exists in the reality of human history and in the realm of God's divine existence. Thus, the Redeemer's particular character must necessarily touch both humanity and divinity if his work is to actually heal the breach between humanity and God.

And, indeed, Christianity reveals the character of the Redeemer to be equally and simultaneously human and divine, without confusion or conflation. And through the revelation of the character of Jesus Christ in history, we find the most complete, most full and most perfect definition of religion ever provided. Thus, it is here that we find the true source and foundation of Christianity, and its most fundamental and most unique characteristic—the Trinity of God.

## 6. CHRIST'S PERSONHOOD<sup>17</sup> IS ETERNAL LIFE

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

What is it in the person of Christ that makes him a perfect Savior, able to provide atonement and redemption? It is most certainly his nature, which is simultaneously human and divine. This nature gives him all of the attributes of God, and the characteristics of an actual human being. This dual nature makes him complete and self-sufficient, unlike other human beings but completely like God. Therefore, his person is uniquely able to communicate both divinely and humanly because he knows both conditions subjectively, personally and intimately. This ability to communicate in both directions makes him the perfect mediator between God and humanity.

The fact that his life is simultaneously comprehensive and individual, perfect and particular, universal and singular, without confusing or com-

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<sup>17</sup> Etymologically, *hood* and *hat* are the same word, ultimately both meaning "head covering."

binning these characteristics makes him unique in human history. In this regard faithful Christian theologians of every variation speak with one voice proclaiming that the character of Jesus Christ, his divinity and humanity in one person, give him the greatest significance possible. In him alone deity and manhood somehow come together. They become unified as one, yet they can still be separately identified. This complex simplicity, this diverse unity stands at the center of the reality of the world in which we actually live as human beings and is an ultimate mystery. It is not that we cannot understand it, but that we cannot understand all of it. The mystery of our own unique individuality and wholeness as human beings is wrapped up in our own unity with the person of Jesus Christ. In him we are unified, both individually and corporately, but not identified. This is the mystery of the Trinity.

Theologians generally agree about this. But the amalgam of their particular explanations provides a range of views, some of which harmonize and some of which conflict. The central conflict is between Pantheism and ordinary Christianity.<sup>18</sup> Pantheism says that this uniqueness is universal, whereas ordinary Christianity specifies that it comes through Christ alone and is historically real in the character and/or person of Jesus Christ. Pantheism turns divinity into a universally applied but “spiritual” abstraction, like Plato’s ideal forms, whereas Christianity holds the ideal and the actual together in creative tension. The ordinary Christian view acknowledges that God in Christ is both universal and personal, both spiritual and actual.

This difference is stark. Whether the union of divinity and humanity is understood as an abstract spiritual ideal that is universally applied to all humanity, or as a particular individual actuality that is uniquely applied to Jesus Christ, these two conceptions accurately capture and reveal the conflict between these archetypal religions. These opposing religious views also produce opposing religious conclusions. Either God becomes human in the particularity of Jesus Christ as Christianity teaches, or humanity becomes conscious of its own eternal divinity as Pantheism teaches. Everything else in our understanding and explanations of human history and religion flow one way or another from this watershed. Many Christians still apply Pantheistic ideas to Christianity because they have not sufficiently experienced and understood the whole character of the actual new life in Christ. Thus, everything depends upon which of these views is regarded as true. Is the central fact of reality the manifestation of Jesus Christ in the flesh as God incarnate? Or is the central fact of history the evolution of human consciousness into the realization of its own divinity? If ordinary Christianity is true, then God is sovereign through Christ and God is the principle cause of history and behavior. And if Pantheism is true, then humanity is sovereign through divine realization and humanity is the principle cause of history and behavior. Thus, Christianity’s driving

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18 Ordinary: having regulated jurisdiction. The ideal or correct understanding of Christianity without the historical baggage associated with the word *orthodox*.



force is the Holy Spirit, and Pantheism's driving force is inspiration and moral influence.

## 7. HEGEL AND THE MODERN SPECULATION

Hegel<sup>19</sup> acknowledged Christianity to be the absolute truth of religion. He did so, because it has its essential nature in the incarnation, which exhibits the unity of the divine and human. On this basis he wanted to reconcile Christianity with the new philosophy that had grown out of Kant's work, and demonstrate their full identity in their last results. For both Christianity and transcendental philosophy<sup>20</sup> this unity represents the highest ideal.

However, what Christianity posits to be the actual, concrete form of the individual, historical God-man is abstracted by philosophy into the realm of speculative thought as something "spiritual," universal and idealistic. This line of thought further posits that it is the nature of the absolute or divine Spirit (God) to actualize itself in humanity as a whole. The consequence is that the human spirit descends into the depths of its own being in order to recognize itself to be divine.

It is the nature and perfection of God to be human, or the other way around, it is the nature and perfection of man to be divine. This is a biblical idea that was realized in Christianity. Christianity has made known to man his divinity through the new birth in Christ. Christianity alone has ended the opposition between God and man, eternity and time. Christianity alone brings heaven down upon the earth. Christianity alone has overcome the dualistic antagonism of the finite and infinite. Christianity laid the foundation the unity of thought (*Monismus des Gedankens*<sup>21</sup>), which forms the great triumph of Modern speculation.

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19 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), a German philosopher, a creator of German Idealism. His historicist and idealist description of reality as a whole revolutionized European philosophy and was an important precursor to Continental philosophy and Marxism.

Hegel developed a comprehensive philosophical framework of Absolute idealism to account for the relation of mind and nature, the subject and object of knowledge, including psychology, the state, history, art, religion and philosophy. In particular, he developed the concept that mind or spirit manifested itself in a set of contradictions and oppositions that synthetically integrated and united historically, without eliminating either pole or reducing one to the other. Examples include synthesis between nature and freedom, and between immanence and transcendence.

20 Transcendental Philosophy: any system of philosophy emphasizing the intuitive and spiritual above the empirical and material.

21 A reference to Hegelian synthesis. The triad *thesis*, *antithesis*, *synthesis* is often used to describe the thought of Hegel, though Hegel never used the term himself. The triad: The *thesis* is an intellectual proposition. The *antithesis* is simply the negation of the thesis, or a reaction to the proposition. The *synthesis* solves the conflict between the thesis and antithesis by reconciling their common truths, and forming a new proposition, also known as a synthetic compromise.

However, the later Hegelians were by no means satisfied. The Hegelian peace made between Christianity and philosophy appeared to them, who were on the political “Left,”<sup>22</sup> to be hollow and was not allowed to stand. They denied that Christianity unifies the finite and infinite as truth requires. They understood the requirement, but denied that Christianity satisfies it. They carped that either Christianity contradicted the necessity of God’s immanence in the world, or the unity of God and Jesus as an historic individual had no relevance regarding the unity between humanity and God.

Therefore, they concluded, the dualism between God and man—between the universal and the particular, between eternity and time—remained unresolved. They did admit, however, that Christianity had become an historical, worldwide movement because of the actual union of God and Christ, though that union had no ability to affect humanity as a whole, but only served to stimulate new ideas like nothing before or since.

The bottom line was that the union itself was not real or historical, regardless of the historicity of Jesus the man. The union was no more than a myth, a story, an idea or abstraction intended only to stir the mere imagination of the church. Because this unity was only a transcendental idea, Christianity fell short of the truth because its unity did not actually connect humanity as a whole with the divine. Indeed, Christianity’s insistence on the reality and universality of human sin seemed to create an unbridgeable gulf between them. Sure, they thought, Christ attained to the requisite unity, but he could not bring humanity as a whole into it. Christ’s unity was understood as an historic fact that was past and gone, or an anticipated future event. But never as a present reality in the here and now.<sup>23</sup>

The Hegelians had three possible conclusions, all of which agreed that the identification of God with the world (pantheism and monism)<sup>24</sup> represents the highest truth. But the difference between them is very material. One concludes that Christianity and speculation are essentially the same—abstract. Another concludes the Christianity and speculation are mutually exclusive. And another allows the unity, but only for a single individual—Jesus Christ, who provided an abstract, ideational and isolated center for Christianity, a “spiritual” realm that has no empirical substance. This ideational realm of abstraction was then posited to be the synthetic domain of all truth, religious or otherwise. Thus, the Hegelian view created a synthetic, abstract and unreal understanding of Christianity.

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22 Traditionally, the Left includes progressives, social liberals, social democrats, socialists, communists and anarchists. The Right includes conservatives, libertarians, plutocrats, reactionaries, capitalists, monarchists, nationalists and fascists.

23 This is the result of the failure to understand/conceptualize the actuality of the Christian Trinity, and its implications for humanity. See the work of Cornelius Van Til, R.J. Rushdoony, Peter Leithart, Phillip A. Ross, etc.—Ed

24 Monism is any philosophical view which holds that there is unity in a given field of inquiry, where this is not to be expected.

Generally speaking, Hegelian philosophy actually grasped the central element of Christianity—the actual divinity of Jesus Christ as an actual person, but reduced it to a mere *caput mortuum*<sup>25</sup> by conceiving the most important element of Christianity as a mere speculation that is at best incomplete. What the Hegelians called the “unity of the divine and human” was understood to have happened only in the case of Jesus Christ, and was not transferable to anyone else except as an abstract thought or story. They denied the reality and extent of sin, Christ’s mediatorial role, Christ’s headship of his body. Or if they did understand them, they considered them to be nothing more than mere thoughts and ideas, without empirical substance. All of this means that they also denied the reality of personal regeneration, or dismissed it as mere enthusiasm.

The vociferous, complex and emotionally laden arguments that followed Hegel’s attempt to unite philosophy and Christianity produced a backwater of stagnant apathy. Christ was simultaneously considered to embody the highest expression of truth, but was impotent to carry it beyond his own hermetically sealed individual person. It remained for Modern philosophy to break the seal and find actual perfection in the speculative germ. But mere philosophy, concerned only about ideas, cannot break into the actual empirical realm. It can only think about it. Nonetheless, Modern philosophy did fix its eye on the center or the very heart of Christianity—the divinity of Christ, but it could only more accurately train its deadly speculative arrows upon this vital point.

We will not consider those philosophies that conceive of God abstractly or beyond the world. Generally speaking, Modern philosophy<sup>26</sup> teaches the simultaneous existence of God in the world and of the world in God. God is not identified as the world, but fills it with his actual presence and power. In this regard it understands Christianity to have put an end to the opposition of the infinite and the finite, the divine and human. But it acknowledges an absolute union of divinity and humanity in Christ alone, which casts a shadow of hopeless dualism every where else.

This kind of unity is not restricted to Christ as an individual human being, but proceeds from him to affect the spiritual organism of which he is the head—the church, which became part of human experience. Here the heaven of personal salvation is not exclusively in the next world, but is involved in the present life as well. Nonetheless, Christianity was not understood to be monistic, in the Hegelian sense<sup>27</sup> Christianity allows for the reality of sin, which creates dualism. The fact that Christianity considers both sin and salvation to be real creates a gulf that must be bridged.

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25 A Latin term whose literal meaning is “dead head” or “worthless remains,” used in alchemy.

26 Nevin didn’t provide specific references.

27 Monism: The doctrine that reality consists of a single basic substance or element. Metaphysical monism produced both materialism and idealism.

The reality of sin finds evidence in the conscience of every person. Sin puts every person in the untenable position of opposing a perfectly holy and just God. Yet, by nature every individual seeks union with God to bridge the gap created by sin. The various monisms must deny this dualism or deny their own validity. And the dualism can only be denied by denying either sin or God—or both. But to deny sin requires the sacrifice of moral awareness (produced by sin) or religious consciousness (produced by God)—or both. Any denial destroys spirituality. At the very least, denial of any kind destroys Christianity because the central concern of Christianity is to bridge the gap between sin and God.<sup>28</sup>

Philosophical speculation solves this dualism problem through the use of logic, reason, redefinition or bald assertion that simply posits that these opposites were originally one. However, logical redemption salves no conscience. Mere reason cannot turn duty into actual ability. The redefinition of sin changes nothing real. Nor can bald assertion create new life. Christianity alone fully accounts for the dualistic opposition as it actually exists. Christianity alone accounts for holiness and sin in such a way as to salve the one with the other. Christianity alone is both source and solution for the contradiction that God's created world lies in sin.

And Christianity alone overcomes this dualism, not by denial but by actually bringing God and humanity into actual, historical union through Jesus Christ. Christianity's solution is not mere thoughts and ideas, but is historically grounded in an actual human life. The actuality of this life is itself the actual power of redemption. Through this one, unique divinely human person humanity finds actual, historical, bodily participation in the divine through union with Christ.

This union comes to humanity, not through the evolution of human consciousness, nor by spiritual inspiration, nor by moral persuasion, but by the actual person who mediates the grace of unity. Philosophy can only stimulate thought. It cannot change minds, renew hearts or restore lives. Christianity alone retains its true character of a genuine theistic religion, in which the dualism of God and sin is honestly acknowledged and actually bridged. Only Christianity acknowledges the absolute holiness of God, the comprehensive power of sin, and provides an eternal solution for a temporal problem.<sup>29</sup>

## 8. CONSTITUTION OF CHRISTIANITY AS THE UNION OF GOD AND HUMANITY THROUGH CHRIST

The best works of theology and philosophy agree that Christ himself was in unity with God. And the testimony of Scripture and the church con-

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28 Nevin is not arguing that Christianity is dualistic, but is pointing to what Cornelius Van Till calls the *antithesis* of Christianity or the opposition between flesh and spirit.

29 Neither religion nor philosophy can provide objective forgiveness or an actual new life.

firm that many people believed that Jesus Christ was divine. The divinity of Christ is the central defining idea of Christianity. And Christianity has had such a real effect on the world that it cannot be dismissed as fiction. It is equally demonstrable that Christ intended to impart his Spirit and life to his people in order to continue and extend his existence in them, and theirs in him, as the means of salvation and the cultivation of righteousness in the world.

The Gospel of John testifies particularly well about this. Christ, who was first glorified by the Father, will glorify himself again in his people (John 17:22). Christians must take the very life of Christ into themselves by eating his flesh and drinking his blood (John 6:53). Christians are symbolically cast into the ground by death through baptism (Romans 6:4), and like a grain of wheat, they themselves rise in the church in order to produce more seed, and multiply and perpetuate themselves through all time (John 12:24). John is very explicit that Jesus will draw people to God as he is lifted up in order to make them one with the Father.

“That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (John 17:21). “I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me” (John 17:23).

All that belongs to God also belongs to Christ, and with all of this divine fullness he communicates<sup>30</sup> himself to his people. He makes his abode with them, and sanctifies them, or as the apostle Paul expresses it, only in reversed order: All is yours, and ye are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s (1 Cor. 3:23).

The ground or root of the Christian faith is that to which it owes its origin and character. It is the actual unity of Christ with God. Because God is actually in unity with God he cannot lie. So, we must believe what he says, and he said that he intended to save the wholeness of the world (John 12:47). This ground or root of Christianity necessarily includes the salvation of the wholeness of the world, and is not simply focused on you or me as individuals. Rather, we are saved into the wholeness of the unity of God and humanity, as well.

Of course, Jesus Christ also knows the reality of human individuality. There is a wholeness of the individual just as there is a wholeness of humanity. Christ’s unity with God is simultaneously individual and corporate, original and final. However, note that Christ’s individuality is complex. “I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one” (John 17:23). “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one” (John 17:21). In us Christ is not single but trinitarian, nor are we single in Christ, but reflect “through a glass darkly” his trinitarian character. The unity with God in Christ is to become, according

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<sup>30</sup> Communicate: transfer to another, join or connect.

to the measure of receptivity, the possession of the whole race.<sup>31</sup> A living head is not to be thought of apart from the body. There can be no redeemed church without a Redeemer, nor is there a perfect Redeemer without an actual redeemed church. Christ is made complete in his people, and in the same way, people are made complete in Christ.

There can be no deeper, higher, more meaningful or more important understanding of the nature and character of true religion. The actual existence and fact of this trinitarian unity in Christ and its necessary implications are themselves the actual composition, character and constitution of Christianity itself. Therefore three things necessarily follow.

First, the religion that provides this revelation of the trinitarian character of God in Christ provides the most important sign and seal of God, and is the truest religion in the truest sense.

Second, the truest religion will authenticate itself by actually manifesting. It will realize itself—make itself real—in the actual, empirical world because its wholeness must necessarily include actual existence in humanity. Its wholeness requires that this unity of God and humanity actually exists as more than an abstraction. Life unified with life must actually be alive.

Third, everything that belongs to the wholeness of this religion must necessarily manifest its best and truest form as the singular holistic wholeness of a particular individual who actually lives in this actual world—Jesus Christ. It is endemic to the reality of wholeness to be more than a mere idea. Such a religion demands the participation of humanity to fulfill its holistic wholeness.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, Christianity best meets the necessary criteria herein specified for such a religion.

## 9. CONTRAST WITH HEATHENISM AND JUDAISM

All religion is primarily about the communion of man with God. The most perfect form of such communion is called *unity*. When individual personalities are blended, merged or melded in the process it produces *identity* rather than *unity* or *union*. The fullest and most perfect form of unity does not involve the loss of individual personality. When the individual personalities are actually alive a mutual interpenetration of spirit and nature takes place, such that they may be said to live in each other freely and sweetly, without resistance or prevention. There is a difference between the unity of creature to creature and the unity of creature to Cre-

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31 There is trinitarian multiplicity in the unity of the Godhead, and that multiplicity is also found wherever Christian unity exists.

32 This is not an expression of Universalism, but is a call for individual participation in the wholeness of humanity, available only in Christ. While it is God's intent to include all of humanity, it will take an eternity to complete. There are two meanings of this: 1) that it will never be complete in history (time), and 2) it will only be complete in eternity.

ator. Creature to creature unity is analogous to cardinal numbers in mathematics, and Creator to creature is more analogous to ordinal numbers.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, religious or spiritual unity occurs when God comes into formal relationship with an individual human being without any obstruction or interference from the individual. In this way God can communicate himself—his love, his grace, his Spirit, his holiness, etc.—to the individual fully, wholly and completely. Such communication fills the individual to overflowing, but does not exhaust God of his greater capacity for wholeness. The individual, by not resisting or interfering, becomes submitted to God's dominion.<sup>34</sup> The individual actively engages the effort to remove obstructions and resistance through prayer and discipline, thus engaging his own subjectivity in the service of God's objectivity.

The individual experiences this effort as doing his own will because it requires his free, personal, active, passionate desire to serve God in this way. Thus, the individual owns the will of God working in him to be his own desire. Thus, there is no conflict in such union between individual self-consciousness and universal God-consciousness. Rather, human desire/will is absorbed into God's desire/will. The various wills lose uniqueness as they identify as One, while the various personalities become more unique through the increasing order and discipline of union.<sup>35</sup>

God alone accomplishes this union by actually changing the innermost will or desire of individuals, through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, to conform to the objective will of God, manifest most perfectly in the person of Jesus Christ. How God accomplishes this change is the subject of this book.

This union, though in seed form, belonged to Adam and Eve in the Garden, when they enjoyed the innocence in which they were originally created. But they yielded to the sin of the serpent, bringing with it separation from God. The object of religion now is to restore the perfect unity with God that has been derailed by sin. This can be accomplished only through atonement. The purpose of atonement is the renewal of communion and perfect union with God. This renewal is not simply a return to the kind of semiconscious innocent communion enjoyed in the past by Adam and Eve in the Garden. Rather, the renewal of communion sanctifies or ripens human consciousness that has been dominated by sin, spiritual discord and conflict.

The religions that historically preceded Christianity also aimed at the central purpose of religion—union with God. Judaism, actuated by the oneness or unity of God and plagued by the pervasiveness of human sin, sought unity, atonement and forgiveness symbolized through sacrifice.

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33 Cardinal: Serving as an essential component. *Ordinal*: The order among the essential components. Thus, the whole (ordinal) is greater than the parts (cardinal).

34 Human dominion of creation is a poor reflection of God's dominion of man (Gen. 1:28).

35 A thousand personalities in union require greater order and discipline than two.

Paganism essentially embraced the moral decrepitude (sin) of humanity by imagining and worshiping various perversions or partial reflections of the One True God through the various establishments of polytheism. Their quest for divine unity led them to embrace sin in their worship and practice, but to justify it through the theological imagination of spirituality in abstract, other worldly terms, thinking that their sin somehow satisfied the various gods of their imaginations. But their denial of the unity of God and their emphasis on sin denied them any kind of true communion, either individually or corporately. The constitution of both Judaism and Paganism made genuine union impossible.

Paganism as a religion cannot correctly conceive or realize union with the only real God that actually exists because Paganism does not reveal the Trinity. The gods of Paganism cannot reconcile eternity and time, infinity and finitude, the ultimate and the proximate, or the One and the many because union between divinity and humanity belongs to the Trinity alone. The idea of Pantheistic unity either identifies humanity with God or identifies God with nature.

The complex unity or singularity of reality<sup>36</sup> gets flattened through the ignorance or denial of the Trinity. The two ideas—divinity and humanity—are confounded, conflated and/or flatly identified apart from the Trinity. With such lack of clarity, there is no way to speak of real union with the only real trinitarian God. It is true that Paganism speaks of unity with the divine, but apart from the conscious texture provided by the Trinity it can attain to nothing more than an imagined identity of humanity with the divine. Thus, it is not true unity with the only real trinitarian God, but is an imagined unity with an imagined god. Genuine union with God only comes through union with the Son of God, the divine man Jesus Christ, who initiates and fulfills the union through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

Genuine unity can only be real on the basis of a constitutionally ethical, monotheistic and trinitarian religion,<sup>37</sup> in which a full, complete and holistic distinction is made between God and his creation. Judaism set up the reality of such union through its Scripture and prophets, but could not actually bond (fully, holistically, wholly, completely and perfectly) with human reality until the Son of God—the long awaited Jewish Messiah—actually manifested in the flesh as the trinitarian Godhead. The unity that Paganism confounded and could not attain because of a faulty constitution, Judaism partly attained through its insistence on monotheism, but could not complete because it could only anticipate the Messiah apart from the perfection of the manifestation of the trinitarian Godhead.

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36 The truth of reality for human beings is always, necessarily and delicately textured because God created us to be creatures of his Word.

37 Christian monotheism is trinitarian and Christian unity is trinitarian because they necessarily involved the Trinity, the One and only real God.



The Jewish Scripture did not deny that the reality of God's being in the world required him to have feet of clay (*in weltlichkeit*) or a fully human nature, but until God manifest as Jesus Christ it was no more than an idea, a thought or abstraction. According to Jewish theology, God works in the realms of nature and humanity (history), but does so objectively, outwardly and/or visibly but not subjectively, inwardly and/or invisibly. They understood God only transcendentally and objectively as the God who created the world, not the God who could be identified with the world—because their focus was exclusively on God's monotheistic character, which they correctly set against the false ideas of polytheistic gods.

Thus, the Jewish God worked exclusively in extraordinary, miraculous ways, in history and through nature, but not individualistically. Never were any Jewish people identified as being God incarnate. They saw God's acts as solitary, abrupt and transient whether God was acting in history, in nature or speaking to/through a particular individual. The Jews, particularly the Jews of the intertestamental period,<sup>38</sup> almost exclusively understood God as Lawgiver and Judge. Even when God worked with individuals or communities he called for change, but did not constitutionally or permanently change anyone. Jeremiah longed for the day that God would actually change hearts and minds (Jer. 31:33).<sup>39</sup> God's demand for changed hearts was made in the Old Testament (Deut. 6:5, etc.), but it remained for God to manifest as Messiah for that demand to be fully met, by grace, of course.

The perfect union of God and humanity requires a constant and consistent communication of the divine Spirit, a permanent indwelling of the divine nature, a fellowship in or on the basis of eternity on the part of man that would include the whole of his existence, personally, corporately and historically. In Judaism we find the seed of such union. But only in Christianity does the seed come to flower and fruitfulness.

All of this is conceivable only on the basis of a perfect or complete religion in which God and humanity can be distinguished without being divided. Such union requires the recognition of God's grace as well as his holiness on the divine side, but also the human capacity for such union on the basis of man's original, created constitution apart from sin. Indeed, God is willing and humanity is able to enter this perfect union—apart from sin. In sin, man's subjective will became disunited from God's objective will. Thus, people began to serve their own desires and concerns disassociated from God, whereas in the absence of sin the subjective desires of

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38 The intertestamental period refers to the time between the writings of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament texts. Traditionally, it is considered to be roughly four hundred years, spanning the ministry of Malachi (c. 420 B.C.), the last of the Old Testament prophets, and the appearance of John the Baptist in the early 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D.

39 Of course, this point is overstated because God always saves in the same way. Rather, this point should be understood as a tendency of the Old Testament and not a hard and fast rule.

humanity were identified with the objective desires of God, both prior to the entrance of sin when those desires existed in seed form, and after the breach of sin is healed in glory. All of this is found in Christianity alone.

The Christian triune God is the only self-existent Creator and Preserver of all things, and is where and/or how Christians live, move and have their being in Christ. Christian life in Christ bears witness to the presence of this triune God. He alone is to be infinitely exalted because he alone is infinitely near, communicating himself through the condescension of boundless love.

Because perfect sinless holiness is actually found in the person of Jesus Christ, who is himself God by the mystical power of the Trinity, so all humanity shares the actual humanity of Jesus Christ by the mystical power of the Holy Spirit through regeneration. The regeneration of humanity as a whole reflects the process of creation in Genesis. Just as humanity is born one person at a time, so humanity is reborn one person at a time.

Thus, every Christian enjoys the privilege of conscious union with God in Christ through the natural exercise of ordinary will,<sup>40</sup> which is actually being regenerated by the Holy Spirit into union with God's will through their own actual, individual, bodily participation in Christ's person, which necessarily includes his actual, individual body—the church.

Here alone we have the true God, holy and boundless in his love, a true man who represents all humanity, people of every nation, race, class, sect and sex, in the most perfect way. Only in Christ is the truest, most complete and perfect union of God and humanity in the undivided and indivisible Oneness of a single living personality. Thus, in Christianity alone is the One Universal Truth that all other religions have struggled in vain to reach, teach, emulate and manifest. Here is the great crown of Christ, not merely distinguishing Christianity from Judaism and Paganism, but setting Christian unity high above all religions, even above the idea of religion itself, and revealing the mystery of actual Christian unity in the Triune God to be both the original seed of the religious urge revealed in antiquity, and the final purpose of religious fulfillment at the end of history.

## 10. THE ABSOLUTE RELIGION IN WHICH ALL OTHERS CULMINATE—THE RELIGION THAT IS JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF

It is the holistic wholeness of Christianity that shows it to be the absolute religion, the ultimate faith of humanity, and the form of piety in which the consciousness of an imperishable nature may take for its motto: "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8).

Religion is the bond of love between God and humanity. It begins as the expression of God's love for man, and culminates as man's love for

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40 Only Christian will is free will because it has been freed from slavery to sin. Unregenerate will is tethered to sin through natural self-concern, the concern of the flesh.

God, which completes the circuit of the Holy Spirit. The perfect religion must be the perfect expression or manifestation of love, the greatest sacrifice of the greatest life for the greatest good of the greatest people. This is found only in Christ. His mission, to be given up to suffering and death, proceeds from God's everlasting love. God did not spare what he loved the most—His only begotten Son, in order to restore the lost wholeness of humanity that was broken by sin. That wholeness could only be restored as it has been broken, by both the archetypal man, Adam, and by each individual who lived in the likeness of Adam. The corporate whole was broken by the first individual or type, Adam, and the renewed corporate whole would be restored by succeeding individuals in the last individual or type, Jesus Christ. Christ's love embraced the highest sublimity and the lowest simplicity in order to unify the grand diversity of humanity in himself. His humanity is essential for his divine Oneness that is manifest in the Trinity.

The subjectivity of Christ's personal love, passion and will on the cross is perfectly identified with the objectivity of God's justice and judgment for the cross. So, Christians follow Christ by the intentional imitation of the Master, by identifying our own subjectivity, our desires and will, with the objectivity of Christ's desire for his people, best exemplified in Scripture alone. As he unreservedly gives himself to God for death through the power of God's love, he simultaneously gives himself to humanity for life through the same power of love. His death and resurrection is<sup>41</sup> our unity. They are distinct but not different. He himself, his life, is the most perfect expression of love from God to man and from man to God, individually and corporately. He is the center of love that circumscribes regenerate humanity. His person is the "well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:14). No other religion has any parallel or resemblance to the depth and height of Christianity.

Only in Christianity is God known as Love, where humanity's love for God is derived from God's love for humanity where love for one another is made identical with love for God. Only in Christianity is the lack of love for neighbor equivalent to the sin of murder. The world has not, nor can it ever, improve the perfection of Christianity, biblically conceived. Christ is simply without parallel in human history, nor will there ever be another like unto him. Nor can Christ's work of atonement and redemption ever be repeated because he atoned for all sin and has redeemed the wholeness of humanity. Christianity, the utmost summit of religion, cannot be transcended.

Upon the full-orbed fellowship of this love rests the moral and spiritual union between God and man. In Christ, the Spirit of God functions without limitation or restraint. Christ's will was fully pervaded by the divine will. "I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me" (John 5:30). "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30). The unity between God and Jesus Christ is complete, perfect, whole and holistic. And

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<sup>41</sup> Singular tense because of the oneness of unity, not a plural tense.

it is the character and reality of its wholeness that makes it available to others. It cannot be unavailable to any individual without losing its wholeness. Its wholeness necessitates its universal availability. However, universal availability is not equivalent to universal application. Because union with Christ involves the union of divine and human will, and will has a conscious element, Christian unity must be conscious unity in order to be whole and complete.

Speculative philosophy suggests that the consciousness of this unity is to be considered merely as a new point reached in the process of world-thought, either in the mind of Christ himself or by the church in its zeal to glorify his person.<sup>42</sup> The human impulse for unity with the divine was most perfectly actualized in the life of Jesus Christ. So, whether that impulse finds its origin in divinity or humanity, it remains uniquely satisfied in Christianity, and even as a conception it cannot be surpassed by anything higher in religion.

Even if religion is nothing more than thought devoid of empirical reality, it has reached its crowning height in Christianity. Were such a thought to actually achieve religious perfection, it would require actualization, for the very definition of perfection requires it. In this way, Christianity stands opposed to Modern speculative philosophy because it exhibits the actuality of Jesus Christ as an historical fact.

Speculative philosophers can only imagine that their speculations correspond to the actuality of reality. In Christ, however, speculation must stop because mere speculation can never come to a right conception of actual unity. Speculative thought cannot actualize itself through speculation. Thus, speculation substitutes the idea of divine and human identity for the actuality of divine and human union in Christ.

If humanity is the manifestation of God in his essential nature, there is no room to speak of his becoming one with God. One cannot *become* what one already essentially is. Thus, the argument for divine/human identity cannot escape the fact that it is no more than an idea that is devoid of actuality. It is without substance or consequence. Of course, the reality of the idea is claimed for the human race as a whole, but the whole of the race is composed of individuals, which are thought to be copies that include the essence of divine identity. However, if even one such copy proves to be less than perfectly identical with the fulness of God's perfection, the theory ends up equating imperfection with perfection. Pure perfection cannot be plagued with such blatant contradiction. It is not possible for such an idea to be perfectly manifested in actuality.

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42 A reference by Nevin to German idealism, a philosophical movement that emerged in Germany in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It developed out of the work of Immanuel Kant and was closely linked both with romanticism and the revolutionary politics of the Enlightenment. The best-known thinkers in the movement were Johann Fichte, Friedrich Schelling, and Georg Hegel, while Friedrich Jacobi, Gottlob Schulze, Karl Reinhold, and Friedrich Schleiermacher were also major contributors.

Thus, speculation occludes the light of God in Christ that is actually shining like the sun in the moral firmament, and offers candles of wax in its place. Regardless of their number, the totality of such candles cannot come anywhere near equaling the intensity of the sun. On the contrary, if this idea of union between the divine and human is true, and the actualization of it is necessary for its perfection, then what is sought from cardinal totality can only be found in ordinal individuality. Because the whole is necessarily greater than the sum of its parts, the whole must be of a different order.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the ordinal individuality of the whole must be actual in order to be perfect.

Everything necessary for the union of divinity and humanity is present in the life of Jesus Christ. In his person the perfect consummation of actual union with God is evidenced, not merely in speculative thought, but in actual history. All that remains is that the theanthropic<sup>44</sup> life that is constituted in the Redeemer himself is actually manifest in humanity in the actual world in which we live. In other words, his willing substitution of his life for ours on the cross needs to be met by our willing substitution of our lives for his in actuality. Because he initiated the process of substitution on the divine side, our substitution on the human side cannot fail to reach perfection in God because it began in perfection in God. On this ground Christianity is the ultimate human religion in which all other religions are mere sects that can realize their wholeness only in Christianity. Thus, the manifestation of Christianity restores the wholeness that is sought by other religions, including speculative philosophy. God and humanity are one only in the trinitarian unity of Christianity, equally universal and equally eternal. This ultimate religion alone provides for the actual unity of the human race.

## II. THE TRUE CENTER OF THE CHRISTIAN SYSTEM FROM WHICH ALL ITS PARTS GAIN THEIR RIGHT PORTION AND LIGHT

It is from this point of view that everything in Christianity can be best arranged and understood. This final conclusion regarding religion in general also serves as the central presupposition upon which to set each element of Christianity in order to understand it to the fullest degree, in its truest light and in its proper position regarding both human history and individual fulfillment.

### Regarding Doctrine

This logical and historical conclusion or presupposition, as has been demonstrated, is not the *sine qua non* of Christianity. Though it is both

43 In set theory, an ordinal number is the order type of a well-ordered set. Two ordered sets  $X$  and  $Y$  have the same order type when they are order isomorphic. When two sets are order isomorphic, they are “essentially the same” in the sense that one of the orders can be obtained from the other by the substitution of one for the other.

44 Theanthropic: both divine and human in nature or quality.

important and significant, it is not the crucial element that actually makes Christianity true. The heart of Christianity is not doctrine, but actual visceral life. The purpose of doctrine is simply to represent and exhibit life. Like the statue of Mercury with which the Alcibiades<sup>45</sup> of Plato compares Socrates, doctrine is merely the shell or hull, in which vital Christian unity abides, both in the divine person of the God-man, Jesus Christ, and in the individual Christian. The seed of Christian unity or union in Christ grows roots in the divine reality and branches in the human reality, but is always only one vine.

Self-revelation is the main purpose and object of Christ's work in the world. Of course, this includes doctrine, for human beings are creatures of the Word. However, Christ's doctrine, which includes the whole of the Old and New Testaments, always serves genuine, actual, Christian unity in Christ. Thus, any doctrine that falls short of this purpose cannot itself be the true, pure, whole and holistic doctrine of God in Christ. Doctrine only has significance or value inasmuch as it serves the visceral life and wholeness of Jesus Christ himself. True doctrine represents Christianity objectively, while genuine personal piety represents Christ subjectively in the lives of individuals. But the holistic wholeness of Christian unity brings this subjectivity and this objectivity into actualized union in Christ.

Therefore, Christian revelation, the revelation of the trinitarian reality of God in Christ, is more full than the revelation of doctrine alone, though intimately and constitutionally connected with it. Christian revelation is not simply the speculative expansion of the knowledge of God abstractly considered. Because we live in a world where sin continues to play a significant role, doctrine that relies on human interpretation and/or authority is always susceptible to sin and error.

Thus, human interpretation and religious authority will be liable to error until humanity as a whole has come to genuine, conscious unity in Christ. Until that time, both objective doctrine and subjective piety must serve the reduction and eventual removal of sin, which is also called *redemption*. Christian doctrine, therefore, must serve the unfolding an actual economy of grace and power for this purpose, a real manifestation of God in Christ that actively educates, enlightens, redeems and sanctifies

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45 Alcibiades, an ancient Athenian statesman, was criticized by ancient comic writers and appears in several Socratic dialogues. He enjoys an important afterlife in literature and art, having acquired symbolic status as the personification of ambition and sexual profligacy. He continues to fascinate the world and appears in several significant works of Modern literature. Nevin's allusion suggests that doctrine plays a role in Christianity like Alcibiades played in Athens in that it thinks itself infinitely more important than it actually is. This is not to say that doctrine is not important, only that too many doctors of doctrine have overstated its role. Unnecessary doctrinal fences must not be built because Christian growth and maturity through sanctification must necessarily crisscross various doctrinal positions on the way to genuine doctrinal truth. Because doctrine can be corrected, insufficient doctrinal positions in and of themselves must not be anathematized.

both the wholeness of the human race, and each peculiar, individual manifestation thereof in the ultimate, objective truth of God in Christ.

Bare words, thoughts, ideas, plans, programs, strategies and/or abstractions are not sufficient to this task. Obviously, revelation of this sort—revelation of the Word of God—is superior to the revelation of mere nature (Romans 2:14). But mere words fall far short of the visceral reality of life, regardless of their degree of conformity to objective Truth. Only as Christian redemption consciously unifies the subjectivity of personal will to the objectivity of divine will, through which the many individual Christians are also unified in Christ, is the living God in Christ fully revealed in actuality.

In the Old Testament we find a necessary, preparatory, but shadowy revelation through forms, writings, doctrines and religious practices that have faithfully served the end purpose of human union with the only existing, triune God.<sup>46</sup> However, the actual, personal manifestation of the grace and truth of this union, as came to dwell among us in Jesus Christ, was necessary to establish its actual perfection. In this sense Christianity alone serves the actual manifestation of the will of God for the salvation of humanity. Christianity alone provides the complete revelation of the wholeness of the person of Christ as the Son of the Father of the Trinity, in word and deed, in life and death, in resurrection and exaltation.

This actual redemption required the complete identification of divine and human will, and its actuality in human history by the individual person of the Redeemer. But for this very reason, he himself, his ordinary person<sup>47</sup> and not mere doctrine about him, constitutes the visceral fullness of the revelation of Christianity. Because this revelation is *in* him, rather than being something apart from him that merely comes *through* him, it is not anything other than his life itself, in the undivided wholeness of his personality and history, his being and work, his doctrine, life, death, resurrection and glorification at the right hand of God. All that we know about Christ, plus his entire actual existence, constitutes his wholeness. This necessarily includes all that he was and is and ever will be, as well as all that he has done and is still doing, as the Head of his body—the church, to the end of time and into eternity.

### **Christianity is also Moral Law**

If however Christianity were only the words of law or even the ideas of law, it would not have transcended the order of Judaism, ancient or modern. Were it only the abstractions of law it would at best only be a reformed, universal Judaism, that could accomplish no actual freedom or renewed life. Because Judaism does not manifest the fullness of union of

46 See: *The Jewish Trinity*, by Yoel Natan, Aventine Press, 2003, which traces the Trinity in the Old Testament.

47 Ordinary: Not exceptional in any way especially in quality, ability, size or degree, lacking special distinction, rank, or status (Gal. 3:28), having regular jurisdiction. Christ's ordinary person refers to his common humanity, not however of its lowest common denominator, but of a new common denominator—being *in Christ*.

God and humanity in an actual human being—which it forbids by law, it would leave Adam’s race under the curse of sin and guilt.

Law, however refined or complete, always remains law. It can never be more than rules imposed by an external authority. It can only influence people with the threat of exaction, accusation, condemnation, imprisonment and death. Only the Holy Spirit can express sufficient love for people such that those who are loved are actually changed subjectively so that they personally desire and will to respond in kind. True love is truly irresistible, and more so with divine love, which is perfectly catered to the uniqueness of each individual personality. True love for another person wells up from within. It cannot be imposed, nor can it be described or controlled by rules. True love must truly issue from freedom of the will. God planted true love for the Father in the Son by the Holy Spirit.

Thus, Christ’s love for the Father issued from his own individual, personal, subjective desire (John 10:17). The Old Testament law was not fulfilled merely by the identity of God’s will with his own, but by the reality of his own personal, fleshly obedience in history. The identity of God’s will with Christ’s will required actualization in history in order to manifest the fullness of its perfection. Only then could the communication of that union be applied to anyone else. Only then was the substitution of Christ’s ordinality applied to the cardinality of other Christians. Only then was the archetype of Christ available to humanity for renewal and redemption.

In Christ, the law comes to be written in the hearts of individuals, thereby transmuted its objective authority into the subjective desire or will of its subject. By fulfilling God’s Old Testament law, its objective demands are mystically transmuted into personal, subjective desires, first for Jesus Christ himself but also and necessarily for all who become consciously united with Christ—his body or church.

To see Christianity itself as being constituted by God’s law is not completely wrong because there are legal and judicial elements of Christianity, particularly related to unrepentant sinners. That is to say that unrepentant sinners are condemned by the authority and jurisdiction of God’s law because they themselves refuse to recognize the reality of Christ’s wholeness, his ability to effect God’s propitiation, or the reality of sin and their own need for redemption, or the truth regarding the place of religion in the life of humanity. Indeed, God does not treat all people, all sinners, the same. Repentant sinners, those who consciously recognize and respond with love of God’s wholeness in Christ—however poorly, receive the wholeness of God’s grace. Those who consciously deny God’s wholeness in Christ—however lightly, receive the wholeness of God’s judgment.

The wholeness of God’s grace does not contradict or contravene the wholeness of God’s judgment against sin precisely because the will of God was identified with the will of Jesus Christ, thereby allowing for the substitutionary atonement of the individuality of Christ for the wholeness of humanity. Consequently, only those who are included in the wholeness of



humanity defined by God alone are included in the wholeness of humanity who are actually redeemed.

The cardinality of the number of redeemed individuals cannot be known by the redeemed themselves because they are redeemed into eternity, and eternity plays havoc with (is of a different order than) temporal mathematics and cardinal identities. Thus, the best and most productive way to describe the cardinal number of the redeemed is to say that it is without limit. Because the magnitude of the number is impossible to determine, the redeemed are filled to overflowing with their new ordinal identity regarding the wholeness of humanity with Christ.

Again, Christianity = atonement + redemption. Because Christianity alone actually frees people from sin and damnation, human freedom becomes real only in Christianity. Human freedom has its highest expression and deepest foundation in the unity of Christ with God. Judaism has no power to set people free in this way. Salvation in Judaism is a matter of community inclusion through symbolic provision, but could not actually remove or atone for sin or establish the wholeness of human life because of its less than universal conception of community.

Judaism is not to blame for the incompleteness of the Old Testament. Indeed, it is to be appreciated and held in high esteem for the preservation of the Old Testament and its steadfast commitment to God's law, because actual redemption could never manifest apart from these things. Nor could it manifest within the circumscription of these things because God himself is not circumscribed by them. The wholeness and perfection of God is greater than the Old Testament, greater than the Mosaic Law, greater than but not different from monotheism, greater than any human conception regarding the inclusiveness of the wholeness of humanity. Rather, the wholeness and inclusiveness of humanity can only be determined by God in Christ alone because God in Christ alone is in unity with God.

Actual unity with God required the medium of an actual individual person, to enter freely into a communion of life through substitutionary atonement with the subjects of redemption. Such a communion could manifest perfectly only as the law of God that condemned humanity to damnation for Adam's sin was satisfied for all of humanity by the death of humanity as a whole, *or* by the One in whom the wholeness of humanity exists. Either of these deaths would atone for the sin because of the legal definition and practice of substitutionary atonement in the Bible.<sup>48</sup>

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48 According to Genesis 22:13, a ram was offered in place of Isaac. This was a substitutionary sacrifice. Further, there is a prophecy of the atoning work of Christ in Isaiah 53:4-5, where Jesus was prophesied to bear our sorrows, to be smitten of God (which is what is due us, the sinners), and that our chastening fell upon him. What was due to us, because of our sinfulness, is what fell upon Christ. Substitution is only valid when there is an equivalence of some kind between the thing and the substitute. Reconciliation requires that the thing and the substitute be of equal value to the account holder—God.

Christ being of infinite value as the Son of God propitiated God by his self-sacrifice, which canceled God's demand for the death of humanity, freeing humanity from the curse of God's law. Christ's own personal human self-sacrifice satisfied God because the wholeness of the ordinal Person of Christ includes the wholeness of human cardinality. Thus, the substitution functions in both directions across the equation. *Us in him*, and *him in us* are equivalent expressions of equivalent value. The substitution is bidirectional.

Thus, all of the curses that were abolished by Christ's redemption, and all of the blessings that it has and yet will produce are actualized through the wholeness of Christ's person. Indeed, the actual life of Christ includes the whole of humanity from creation to eternity because of his divine nature. Divinity is not burdened or limited by temporality.<sup>49</sup>

Only one who is himself morally free can represent or impart freedom to others. Furthermore, he who can set all humanity free, must necessarily be sinlessly perfect and fully united with God. He must have the jurisdiction, the authority, the power and the will to do so. Such a person or life, overflowing with divine blessedness and love, must include in its essential constitution equivalency with the person of God himself, equivalency with the wholeness of humanity, equivalency with the individuality of an actual human being. Only the constitution of Jesus Christ contains such equivalencies.

Only through these equivalencies can the wholeness of the divine will of God be substituted for the individuality of an individual will. Thus, this substitution of One will by another unites the subjectivity of human will with the objectivity of God's will through one act of substitution. And so, the conscious desire of Christ becomes the conscious desire of Christians such that Christians are self-motivated to conformity to Christ's will for his people to actually practice and manifest the character of Christ as it is revealed in the Bible. In addition, the divine constitution of Christ makes it impossible that Christ's wholeness can ever be impaired or exhausted.

Redemption requires atonement, pardon for sin and peace with God which is defined as human peace because of the composition of Christ's character. Such reconciliation can be effected only by an actual human individual in whom the love and grace of God are identical with God's desire for the holistic wholeness of life, which at every level and in every way provides a web of cooperative interactivity among the various parts, kinds and creatures of life. It also provides individual communion with the divine person or life himself.

Jesus Christ is in tangible unity or common union with God, and the ability to perceive that unity creates a sort of moral gravity that draws people into common union (communion) with Christ. The original unity of Christ with the Father in the trinitarian Godhead is the basis and model for

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49 Temporality: The worldly possessions of a church. Christ possess his church like a head possesses a body.

the atonement or restoration of union between humanity and God in Christ. By paying close attention to Paul's words we see that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). Paul clearly said that the existence of God in Christ was and still is the first cause of unity and atonement flows necessarily and completely from that first cause as an effect.

Everything else in Christianity finds its context and meaning from the unity of the trinitarian Godhead. In the unity of the trinitarian Godhead Christian theology and anthropology also find a model for unity, common cause and common concern, so that they do not war against each other but find their common origin and purpose in Christology. In the unity of the trinitarian Godhead God enjoys the highest and most unique glory for his condescending grace to lost sinners, and man enjoys the highest form of dignity and grandeur through growth in the likeness of Christ.

On both sides of the union (God's and man's) Christian revelation satisfies the deepest religious want (both lack and desire) of our ordinary human nature, restores to the spiritual world its inward harmony, and solves the mystical riddle of the universe.<sup>50</sup> The unity of God in Christ provides the only channel through which God works miracles because the actual contact or overlap of divinity and humanity involves the actuality of higher powers and laws.

Christianity is not remembering Jesus or using the stories of Jesus to motivate us to try harder or be better or avoid sin, etc. Christianity is the actual, living, visceral body of Christ in union with the Head of the body, Jesus Christ, such that the Head and the body (the church) constitutes one actual, living person.<sup>51</sup>

The resurrection of Christ in particular, the greatest miracle ever, can be understood as the natural and necessary consequence of the reality of

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50 The mystical riddle must ultimately answer the question of God. What is God? What is life? How can anything exist? Nevin's age was flush with this concern and various answers were coming from Rationalism, science, Spiritualism, Theosophy, etc. What these views all share is an underlying monotheism of one sort or another.

Others who later contributed to this discussion include Friedrich Nietzsche, who suggested that the quest for meaning was futile; Ernst Haeckel, who promoted and popularized Charles Darwin's work in Germany and developed the recapitulation theory ("ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny") claiming that an individual organism's biological development, or ontogeny, parallels and summarizes its species' entire evolutionary development, or phylogeny; and William James, who denied the possibility of a unified answer, and thereby denied the possibility of absolute truth. These answers carried the day, and still enjoy popularity.

Nevin proposed that biblical Christianity alone can answer the question. And this book goes on to say that Nevin was right because Christianity alone is trinitarian. The reality of the union of the trinitarian Godhead is the answer that only regeneration in Christ provides.

51 While other Christian theologies agree in principle with much or all of this, Nevin goes on to say that the reality of Christianity is not the potential that Jesus Christ can work through his church, but that Christianity is the reality of Jesus Christ actually living through his church.

divine perfection. God's eternal nature must be eternally actual in order to be perfect. Indeed, the life bond or covenant that unites the persons of the Godhead also unites Christ with his people, and provides the foundation for Christian eschatology, regeneration being the first stage of the resurrection of believers, which is the end or purpose of God's creation itself.

## 12. RECAPITULATION—MYSTICISM AND REFORMATION

What has been said here so far:

The specific, distinctive character of Christianity is not its doctrine, nor its morality, nor even its mere power of redemption. Rather, Christianity is the unique constitution, religious significance and the actual life of its Founder, who alone unites divinity and humanity truly and perfectly in his person. Doctrine, law and redemption rest on the actuality of his life.

In terms of doctrine Christianity appeals to human understanding. In terms of law, it appeals to human will. In both cases, it originates as something outside of people and is applied in a mechanical, cause and effect way. It works to change people by causing a secondary effect, an increase of knowledge or a change of behavior. In a sense, doctrine guides knowledge and law guides behavior, but in both cases the guide isn't natural to the person. In neither case (as doctrine or as law) does Christianity work to establish a primary cause that functions autonomously, such as changing personal abilities or desires. Neither doctrine nor law changes desires.

In contrast, the character of Christian redemption changes the soul, the heart or central purpose of individuals. It doesn't add to the old purpose but revamps or replaces it so that the most fundamental desires, drives and instincts become self-motivated to serve and achieve God's purposes. Prior to redemption the subjectiveness of autonomy serves sin and selfishness. It remains subjective. But after redemption the subjectiveness of autonomy serves the objectivity of Christ in God. The self-concern of a sinner is himself, but the self-concern of a Christian is Jesus Christ.

Christ dwells in a person only inasmuch as everything in the person finds its primary reference in Christ. People are in union with Christ when they stop asking what Jesus would do as if they don't know, but they simply do what Jesus wants them to do because they do. People are in union with Christ when the habit of their ordinary behavior pleases the Lord. People are in union with Christ when they stop trying to please the Lord in order to gain his favor, as if they don't already have it in abundance. People are in union with Christ when they face an impossible task and say, "nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt" (Mark 14:36), or "not ... my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38), or "I can do nothing on my own" (John 5:30).

Christianity is in the fullest sense organic,<sup>52</sup> in its nature. Christianity is a unique order or arrangement of life in Christ such that the self-concern of the individual is the genuine concern for the well-being of humanity as a whole that reflects the integrity of Christ's desire, character and behavior evidenced in the Bible. When the most fundamental self-concern of an individual actually serves the glory of God and his kingdom, his will is said to be unified with Christ's will.

From this center one's personal, subjective self-centered desire is transformed into Christ's universal, objective other-centered desires. Christ's objectivity then becomes fused to my subjectivity. At that point, doctrine becomes food, the threat of the law gives birth to the joy of obedience, the promise of reconciliation gives way to the confidence of redemption. In Christ Christians don't deny or degrade what is natural—body, appetites, pleasures. Nor do they oppose such things as if they are evil. Rather, in Christ such things are rightly ordered and related to God's purposes and enjoyed as sanctified fruit in God's kingdom. In Christ everything finds its proper orientation. In Christ the religion of humanity simply serves God's glory.

In any case, Christianity is both the only religion that actually redeems and the only religion that actually unites God and humanity. These two things both condition and complete each other. Redemption comes only through this unity, and the purpose of unity comes in redemption. The unity is subjective and personal, the redemption is objective and universal. Redemption is the heart and life of Christianity, unity is its head and mind. The understanding of Christianity as redemption comes more out of Paul's letters, the idea of union with God issues from John. Redemption is about overcoming obstacles and is more practical, unity looks to the end and purpose of humanity and is more mystical and theological. Redemption has to do with faith and hope—becoming, unity with love—being.

Because redemption starts from the union of God in Christ and leads to the unity of humanity in him as its ultimate purpose, and because redemption ceases when there is no more sin, while unity like love can never fail, and because redemption is tethered to time and the present state of the world, while union with God is eternal, bridging the alpha and the omega in its wholeness, unity is the *sine qua non*, the foundation and crown of Christianity. Unity outlives redemption and is therefore more fundamental.

In conclusion, only the religion of Christianity actualizes what all other religions can only hope for—the union of God and humanity in Christ. This union is the constitution of a new organic creation, a new creature that has a unique kind or type of life in the world. This new kind or type of life works its way into the world by working its way out from the heart of humanity, by doctrine and moral initiative, by redemption and reconcili-

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52 Organic: being or relating to or derived from or having properties characteristic of living organisms.

ation, utterly changing people as individuals and as a race in order to fulfill destiny—God’s declarative will, into union with God in Christ. This is the substance of communion with Christ, whereby all life is sanctified and exalted into a higher order of existence.<sup>53</sup>

This view of Christianity is not completely new, though some of the texture and subtleties could not be articulated until the Modern era. The origin of this view goes back to Genesis, and to God’s decree prior to creation. So, it is no surprise that it can be found in bits and pieces from time immemorial, and in the early expressions of the ancient church. The idea that a mystery lies at the center of Christianity is original to Christianity itself.

While it is beyond the scope of the present volume to review it in its entirety, it is significant that it appeared in various forms of Christian Mysticism. Of particular concern is its expression in Germany during the Middle Ages. Its most serious and consistent expositor was Meister Eckhart.<sup>54</sup> For Eckhart the union of God and man through the incarnation of God and the deification of the man, provides the central concern of the religion of Jesus Christ. In this regard, as well as in its treatment of Christianity, Eckhart’s Mysticism has a striking affinity with the Modern speculative philosophy, except that Mysticism finds its source in Jesus Christ whereas speculative philosophy springs from the creative abilities of human thought. Speculative philosophy is secular, whereas classical Mysticism is necessarily Christian.

The general point of coincidence between the *Mystical Presence* and classical Christian Mysticism is that while Mysticism transfers the objective elements of religion into the personal, subjective, human spirit. Doing so allows both aspects (human and divine) to lose their proper proportion and reality through the suggestion of ontological identity rather than moral union. In both, the objective, historical reality of Christ is mystically trans-

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53 The idea of higher order is at the heart of mysticism. It is also related to Modern mathematical set theory, which applies to this discussion because we are discussing membership in the body of Christ, and said membership can be considered in terms of a well ordered set. The Modern study of set theory was initiated by Georg Cantor and Richard Dedekind in the 1870s.

54 Eckhart von Hochheim (1260 -1327), commonly known as Meister Eckhart, was a German theologian, philosopher and mystic. *Meister* is German for *Master*, referring to the academic title *Magister in theologia* he obtained in Paris. Coming into prominence during the decadent Avignon Papacy and a time of increased tensions between the Franciscans and Eckhart’s Dominican Order of Friars Preachers, he was brought up on charges later in life before the local Franciscan-led Inquisition.

Tried as a heretic by Pope John XXII, his *Defence* is famous for his reasoned arguments to all challenged articles of his writing and his refutation of heretical intent. He purportedly died before the verdict was received, although no record of his death or burial site has ever been discovered. He was well known for his work with pious lay groups such as the Friends of God and succeeded by his more circumspect disciples of John Tauler and Henry Suso. In his study of medieval humanism, Richard Southern includes him along with Saint Bede the Venerable and Saint Anselm as representative of the intellectual achievement of the Middle Ages.

formed into the actual, subjective reality of the individual. Here Christ is not simply the thought of an objective Savior who lived a long time ago, but Christ himself actually becomes the Redeemer who actually lives in the redeemed person through regeneration.<sup>55</sup>

Here again, however, we must take care not to stray into heresy. There are three classic heresies to avoid:

1. The denial of Christ's Divinity—which lead to Ebonism, Arianism (Jehovah's Witnesses), Nestorianism, Socinianism, Liberalism, Humanism, Unitarianism.
2. The denial of Christ's two natures—which lead to Monophysitism, Eutychianism, Monothelitism. These all confuse the two natures of Christ by absorbing one of His natures into the other.
3. The denial of Christ's humanity—which lead to Docetism, Marcionism, Gnosticism, Apollinarianism, Monarchianism, Patripassianism, Sabellianism, Adoptionism, Dynamic Monarchianism.

Discussion of each heresy is beyond the scope of this book. Rather, we will focus on the general tendency of all heresy to collapse one or the other of Christ's natures into the other. Eutychianism leads to the divination of man. The other tendency, Apollinarism or Apollinarianism holds that Christ had a human body and human "living principle," but that the Divine Logos was the "thinking principle," analogous but not identical to what might be called a *mind* today. Apollinarism leads toward framing Christianity as if it is no more than moral persuasion.

Meister Eckart was a Pantheistic Mystic, a Christian Neoplatonist and a Eutychist who understood God to be essentially fecund, creative, sort of like a seed. He saw Jesus as the "first of a kind" who was creating others just like himself. Evolutionary ascent into godhood is a very ancient idea that is found in many other religions. Eckhart was highly lauded by theistic minded philosophers and religionists involved in the various kinds of Modern speculation that were proliferating in the Nineteenth Century.

From this perspective, union with God's divine nature is the product of thought or realization, which was a stage in the development of consciousness. Here Jesus Christ is understood to be only a human type or a Platonic form and without actuality. So, his history is only figurative and allegorical. Christ was thought to be the first who came to the sense of his sonship in relation to God. So, by Christ people learn that they also partake of the same nature, and are in like manner sons of God as Jesus was.

With Apollinarism the unity of Christ with God is regarded as the result of a free act of self-communication on the part of God, conditioned by the moral character of Christ, who accordingly carries with him more signi-

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<sup>55</sup> A human being is more than an individual human body. No individual human body can live apart from the social structures of human society. Thus, the structures of society are a necessary part of a human being, and these structures are necessary for actual life. Human beings reflect God's trinitarian character, poorly and through a glass darkly—but actually.

ficance as an historical prototype. His divinity is collapsed into his humanity. Here, union with God is brought about by Christ through his exclusively moral influence. Eutychianism, alternately, resolves the unity mainly into the exercise of abstract thinking. Apollinarism works to reach unity by an ethical and often ascetic practice. In Eutychianism the mystery involves the identification of God and man as a matter of nature or ontology. In Apollinarism, it is a matter of grace, made possible through the redeeming influence of Christ, by the self-discipline of mortification and a new inward life as a matter of moral commitment.

The pantheistic mysticism of Eckhart is the precursor and provides the pattern for Modern philosophical speculation. Apollinarism, on the other hand, finds its pattern in the introspection and warmth of its religious life. It involves finding truth by looking within one's self, which prepared the way for the Reformation. In the Reformation emphasis on God's act of justification by grace alone, however, a new element was emphasized. The Mystics tended to overlook the darkness of human life: the pervasiveness and extent of sin and the need of redemption and atonement.

The consciousness of sin was powerfully awakened in Luther, and was emphasized heavily in the work of the Sixteenth Century. Consequently, deliverance from the power of sin, and reconciliation with God, were understood to be the main thing in Christianity because redemption in this Protestant theology could not be accomplished by an ideal image (speculation or abstraction), but only by a real person. Therefore, the historical person of Christ was clothed again with new authority and prominence. And so the historico-ideal<sup>56</sup> was conceived to be the center of Christianity.

Still however, the Reformers overemphasized the fact that Christ was an actual Redeemer and Mediator in the flesh, but were not able to envision the wholeness of his person or character, which alone accounts for his divinity or perfect unity with God. The uniqueness of Christ's perfect dual nature as human and divine allows him alone to be the actual, human manifestation of the new prototype for the individual wholeness and integrity of human beings and the historical manifestation of God himself who alone provides the mediation of redemption.

This brings us back to the fundamental insight and error of the Mystics—the identification of God and man. The Mystics were right that Christ enjoyed ontological identity with God himself as the Son of God in the trinitarian Godhead. Their error is in thinking that such ontological identity can also belong to other human beings—it cannot! The role and reality of Christ's person in human history is unique, as is the role and reality of every individual person.

Nonetheless, as we reflect on the Truth of God from a Twenty-first Century perspective, which is more ripe and mature for the same reason that fruit matures on the vine over time, we do not want to lose the true

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56 The unity of the historical and the ideal, the actual and the speculative, the real and the ideal.



and genuine insights of the Reformation. Reformation theology has made serious and genuine contributions toward human wholeness and the maturity of Christianity envisioned in Scripture. While heresy tends to collapse Christ's divinity into his humanity or his humanity into his divinity, orthodox Christianity<sup>57</sup> holds that the uniqueness of Christ's person consists in his eternal and historical role as the very Son of God in the individual personhood of Jesus Christ by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in his life.

The mystery of Jesus Christ is the reality of his humanity and his divinity in one historical yet eternal person.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, we must hold and appreciate the historical contributions of Christ's church in every age as they contribute to its ripeness and maturity. Here, we will focus on two major streams and endeavor to consider their unique contributions to the Truth of Christianity without conflating or confusing them. There is value and a measure of truth in the Mystical tradition of speculation though it has erred on the one side. And there is value and truth in the more practical, earthy ordinariness of the Reformation though it has erred on the other.

We are endeavoring here to see the Truth in such a way as to appreciate and unify what is true in both views without violating the uniqueness of Christ's divinity, Jesus' humanity or the unity of God in Christ that is the church. In the same way that we can be united in Christ without becoming divine ourselves, and without devolving Christ's divinity into merely being a crutch of moral influence, so the truth and beauty of Mystic speculation can be corrected by the truth and beauty of Reformation practicalities and applications. And simultaneously, the truth and beauty of the Reformation can be corrected by the wisdom and sensitivities of Mystic speculation.

Thus, Christianity is the religion of unity with God in its Founder, and the union of believers with God in Christ. All of this, its wholeness, can be conceived and practiced rightly only when the true religion is found to rest on the inalienable Christian idea of a personal God, including Christ's personal propitiation, reconciliation and redemption, and our personal repentance, faith, knowledge and sanctification. All of these elements are of a whole and must maintain their complete and unimpaired authority as

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57 This is not a reference to the Orthodox Church of the East, but to the reality of a correct conception of Christianity that approaches errorlessness. It is a conception that does not collapse divinity into humanity or humanity into divinity. And therefore, it is both special in the sense of being unique and ordinary in the sense of being common, in the sense of establishing true Christianity as the model and basis for humanity through regeneration.

58 An ever present difficulty regarding the correct conceptualization of Christianity is the fact that it exists eternally in time. It brings the infinitude of eternity into the temporality of time, but any particular segment of time cannot contain the wholeness of eternity. So, all expressions of eternity in time and history fall short of the wholeness they intend to convey.

dependent upon but still indispensable constituents of the new creation in Christ Jesus.<sup>59</sup>

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59 Nevin seems to be saying that there is an element of truth in the abstract speculation of the mystics, but that such speculation must be done in the light of the Reformation focus on human sin and the moral consequences of our redemption. In addition, Nevin seems to be concerned about the mystical emphasis of union with God apart from Christ, which tends to bring humanity into a divinity equal to that of Christ. The correction of this tendency is to emphasize a trinitarian unity with Jesus Christ, which results in the fulfillment of our humanity rather than our elevation into divinity.